

Ridván 2021 Annual Report

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





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Beloved Friends and Co-workers,

Launched at Ridván 2016, the Five Year Plan has now reached a triumphant conclusion. As around us strife, disintegration, and chaos have continued to accelerate, multitudes of our fellow citizens, feeling keenly the despair these forces are giving rise to, have increasingly longed for a hopeful perspective. In growing numbers, they are being attracted to the inclusiveness, cohesion, and unity manifest in this community of believers in the Greatest Name of God, as we confidently and energetically work to create a new civilization founded on recognition of the oneness of humanity. As we pause to celebrate this moment, our hearts are filled with gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the plentiful opportunities these years have presented to us and for the remarkable growth they have made possible.

In the United States, a clear and exciting increase in these powers of attraction is being illustrated by the progress we are witnessing across the nation in the advancement of clusters from one milestone of growth to the next. The process is progressing with growing momentum, thanks to a combination of persistent effort and accumulating experience. At the Plan's outset, for example, just eight clusters had advanced beyond the third milestone on the continuum of growth—meaning that there were eight clusters carrying on some 100 core activities of various kinds, including hundreds of participants. After three years, the total reached 19. During the fourth year of the Plan, another 15 were added, for a total of 34. As of this writing, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, another 26 have made the same advancement—for a grand total of 60, with more following closely behind them.

At the same time, we have seen a remarkable increase in core activities, most notably devotional gatherings, together with steady growth in the number of their participants. At this writing, nearly 77,000 people are involved in core activities and a third of them are not members of the Faith. They represent the wide spectrum of the human family's diversity, and, in neighborhoods where growth is most evident, they include African Americans, Latinos, American Indians, African immigrants, and others. Of particular note is the growth in devotional gatherings, lending a new source of spiritual impetus and strength to the life of the community. Like most of our other activities in the past year, these have made creative and resourceful use of the online technologies available to us, and have yielded lessons about the use of such technologies that will last beyond the current difficulties.

Underlying these achievements is the firm establishment of the institute training process, which has provided the concepts and approaches needed to achieve both accelerated and sustained growth of the Cause in the years to come, and to facilitate the emergence of patterns of community life that increasingly reflect the transformative powers latent in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh—powers that will directly affect those who join with us, and indirectly affect the larger society of which we are still a very small part.

We will not attempt to summarize here the achievements of the Five Year Plan or the 25-year period since the worldwide establishment of the institute process. Yet a brief mention of the ways in which our understanding and capacities have grown is warranted. We now have a clear framework for action, encompassing all of the dimensions necessary for growth, and fostering their emergence in an organic and coherent manner as increasing numbers of individuals acquire the knowledge, skills, and insights necessary to contribute to progress. These capacities are fostered through deep and sustained contact with the Word of God, coupled with progressively more complex acts of service. The process is open to all people, whether members of the Faith or not, regardless of their age or background.

A system of learning has come into existence and matured, complementing an established pattern of action and reflection at the grass roots, through which knowledge and insights can be regularly generated and disseminated using a common conceptual frame of reference. Unprecedented numbers of people are participants in this process. In every cluster where a program of growth is in operation, whatever its level of intensity, it is possible now to conceive of a steadily expanding nucleus of souls who, in a spirit of unity, are joining hands with others to create communities notable for the character of a devotional life linked to service.

In the United States, the advances of 2020–21 in particular are remarkable in their having taken place amid the severe restrictions imposed by a global pandemic, a resurgence of racial unrest at levels not seen for many decades, heightened political tensions, and steadily deteriorating and divisive discourse in the public sphere. Paradoxically, these tests refocused our energies while generating a new level of receptivity to the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh.

The June 19 statement of the National Spiritual Assembly, titled “Forging a Path to Racial Justice,” was an effort to recognize the long-standing problem of racial prejudice in this country, and to provide insights derived from the Bahá’í teachings pointing the way forward to the establishment of a truly unified and just American society.

The year also required us to think more profoundly about the connection between the Blessed Beauty’s exhortations to institutions and individuals to address the need for racial justice, admonitions that were repeatedly enlarged upon by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and underscored by Shoghi Effendi. It further prompted us to deeper study of the concepts and approaches to the issue provided by the Universal House of Justice in this latest series of Plans. The National Spiritual Assembly published a series of letters to the community, beginning in February 2017, on the theme of racial justice and the Five Year Plan. In May 2020, it published a compilation of the abundant guidance received from the Universal House of Justice on that same theme. In the past year, the Assembly continued its work to assist the friends and to speak out on the theme of racial justice on several fronts, some highlights of which follow.

The Assembly issued a public statement on June 19 titled “Forging a Path to Racial Justice,” which appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* and was simultaneously distributed throughout the country. The statement was an effort to recognize the long-standing problem of racial prejudice in this country, and to provide insights derived from the Bahá’í teachings pointing the way forward to the establishment of a truly unified and just American society. A link to a press release calling attention to the statement was eventually published in some 65 additional newspapers and online news sources, and the statement also became an important resource for local communities in their engagement in discourse on the theme of race.

For a number of years, the Assembly’s Office of Public Affairs has been active in developing relationships with leaders of thought and with organizations devoted to racial justice. During this period, the Office has hosted a sustained series of seminars on the issue, and, in May 2021, plans to hold a major online symposium on race. The proceedings of that symposium, which will feature Bahá’ís and others as speakers and panelists, will be made available to the community.

In January of this year, the Office of Public Affairs released a series of webinars designed to assist Local Spiritual Assemblies and others to join the discourses of society on the nation’s pressing social ills. The series draws on the Office’s many years of experience to demonstrate how capacity for such engagement can be built, with a special focus on racial justice.

The Assembly established a Race Unity Action resources website (at www.bahai.us/race-unity-action) as a source for guidance on the pursuit of race unity within the context of the Five Year Plans’ framework for action. The site includes abundant compilations of guidance, links to relevant literature, videos and artistic productions, and a compendium of reports from individuals and communities describing efforts consistent with the framework for action’s principal elements: expansion and consolidation, social action, and engagement in discourse on race. The site has now recorded thousands of visits and downloads of its resource materials.

Complementing this effort is the continuing development of the video series *A Rich Tapestry*, which chronicles the efforts of friends in various clusters to build communities characterized by inclusivity and love. Some of these same stories, as well as many others, have been regular features in *The American Bahá’í*. For a second year, the permanent and seasonal Bahá’í schools offered a course on “Walking Together on a Path Towards Race Unity and Oneness,” using a similar approach to that found in the Ruhi sequence—that is, focusing on selected passages from the Bahá’í sacred writings and other authoritative texts, complemented by relevant narratives and skill-building exercises. In addition, the permanent schools have engaged in new ways of presenting the theme of race unity through artistic expression and have engaged in dialogue with the larger community on the issue of race.

The Wilmette Institute introduced a course on the history of racism and

anti-Blackness in the United States. The course examines our history from the perspective of renowned scholars, as well as the perspective of the Bahá'í teachings. It is an important step forward in assisting the friends to obtain a more accurate understanding of American history and how we as Bahá'ís can work for a better future.

The Bahá'í Publishing Trust and Distribution Service has produced and made available a series of essential readings on the issue of race unity. Among these is a new magazine-format publication, [A Spiritual Path to Unity and Social Justice: The Bahá'í Faith in America](#), which describes our efforts to transform American society based on the spiritual principles at the heart of the Faith.

The Assembly also continued its support of the [Bahá'í Chair for World Peace](#) at the University of Maryland, which has developed a rich array of programs and publications on the issue of race; has served as a cosponsor of the [National Center for Race Amity](#), a Bahá'í-inspired organization; and has helped to promote the programs of the [Association of Bahá'í Studies in North America](#), which regularly address race.

Finally, virtually every message addressed to Nineteen Day Feasts in the past year focused on the theme of race and the Plan, in hopes of ensuring the level of profound reflection required at this critical stage in the development of the Faith and the history of our country.

These efforts have been mirrored in countless ways at the grass roots of the community, in the form of hundreds of devotional gatherings focusing on the theme of race unity and in a variety of social action initiatives and numerous efforts by individuals and institutions to engage in public discourse on this most vital and challenging issue.

Both the number and the range of these activities are too extensive for a brief summary, but we do wish to take special

note of the “Pupil of the Eye” gatherings for friends of African descent. Launched in November 2019, the gatherings have continued and have inspired a number of related gatherings and initiatives. They were conceived by a group of believers as a forum for African-American Bahá'ís and their contacts to profoundly contemplate the characterization given them by the Blessed Beauty, to be later affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in these memorable words:

Bahá'u'lláh once compared the coloured people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white. In this black pupil you see the reflection of that which is before it, and through it the light of the Spirit shines forth.

Through prayer, a deep study of the sacred writings, the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, and mutual encouragement, these gatherings have inspired many souls to enter or to re-engage in the arena of teaching and service.

A further outgrowth is being seen in the involvement of hundreds of African-American believers in study of Book 8 of the Ruhi sequence, which focuses on the theme of the Covenant, generating a new level of commitment and activity. The Assembly ardently wishes and prays for the friends of African descent to take their proper place, together with the Indigenous peoples of the continent, at the forefront of the teaching work in this country.

Another of the highlights of the past year was the remarkable letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the United States by the Universal House of Justice on July 22. Responding to the turbulent social conditions American Bahá'ís are facing, the House of Justice reminded us again that our work in advancing the Plan is the surest means for removing once and for all the stain of racial prejudice from our society:

The principles and exhortations that guide your steps are well known to you from the writings of

The National Spiritual Assembly ardently wishes and prays for the friends of African descent to take their proper place, together with the Indigenous peoples of the continent, at the forefront of the teaching work in this country.



We have all the tools and resources necessary to achieve a level of unprecedented progress. Our fellow citizens increasingly yearn for a source of truth to which they can turn. Might we not envision the coming year as the beginning of a new era in teaching such as we have never before witnessed?

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

The Supreme Body also reminded us that the Plan is not simply a set of activities. It is fundamentally a spiritual endeavor which requires wisdom and profound attention to principle:

The change required is not merely social and economic, but above all moral and spiritual. Within the context of the framework governing your activities, it is necessary to carefully examine the forces unfolding around you to determine where your energies might reinforce the most promising initiatives, what you should avoid, and how you might lend a distinctive contribution. It is not possible for you to effect the transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh merely by adopting the perspectives, practices, concepts, criticisms, and language of contemporary society. Your approach, instead, will be distinguished by maintaining a humble posture of learning, weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines.

Dear friends, in the coming year we will bring to a close a period of special potency. It began in 2016 with the 100th anniversary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. This was followed by the

observances in 2017 and 2019 of the Bicentenaries of the Births of the Twin Manifestations of God for the Age, which enhanced still further the spiritual forces at work in the world. In the coming year, we will observe the Centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and with it the close of the first century of the Formative Age of the Faith.

As we remember our beloved Master in the months to come, we will surely call to mind His station as the Center of the Covenant, and the implications of that Covenant for the unification of the human race. We will remember the special love and attention He showered upon the Bahá'is of America, together with His clear and uncompromising admonitions addressing the need to eliminate racial prejudice from our nation. We will also find new resolve and consecration to the work of advancing His Father's Cause throughout the length and breadth of this country. We have all the tools and resources necessary to achieve a level of unprecedented progress. Our fellow citizens increasingly yearn for a source of truth to which they can turn. Might we not envision the coming year as the beginning of a new era in teaching such as we have never before witnessed?

The Universal House of Justice has clearly expressed its hope for us in the following terms:

[T]he year will be an opportunity to consolidate the achievements made during the current Plan, while cultivating the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community recognized for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation. At the national, regional, and cluster levels, we look to communities of proven strength to help those in which less experience has accrued. In this year-long effort, every community must draw on whatever untapped potential it may possess and seek to overcome any obstacles that are impeding its growth, thereby

preparing it for the demands to come. For it is within the context of a flourishing community, especially a centre of intense activity in a village or neighbourhood, and when each element of the Plan's framework is given the attention it requires, that those elements most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community's powers in the field of action.

The Supreme Body has also assured us of the victories that will assuredly come as the result of our strivings to emulate the Perfect Exemplar of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh:

Ahead of you lie times of trial and promise, of hardship and progress, of anguish and joy. Under all conditions, the Master is your solace and support. For those who aspire to lasting change, His example guides the way—tactful and wise in His approach, penetrating in utterance, indiscriminating in fellowship, unflinching in sympathy for the down-trodden, courageous in conduct, persevering in action, imperturbable in the face of tests, unwavering in His keen sense of justice. And to all who arise to emulate Him, He offers this unflinching assurance: *“that which is confirmed is the oneness of the world of humanity. Every soul who serveth this oneness will undoubtedly be assisted and confirmed.”*

The following pages chronicle the principal lines of action undertaken by this Assembly and its subsidiaries over the course of the past year. In the broad range of these diverse endeavors you will see our community's continuing efforts to foster patterns of activity at every level to apply Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving teachings to the many needs of our time. We hope you will pay particular attention to the strategies by which the Regional Bahá'í Councils and Regional Training Institutes are, in their respective areas of service, advancing the development of clusters. Two narratives specially prepared

by our Learning Desk will richly repay your reading in this regard. The first, titled “Advancing the process of entry by troops in the United States, 1996–2021,” presents some highlights of the vital learning acquired by this community over the entire 25-year span of the most recent series of Plans devised by the Universal House of Justice. The second is a concise and helpful summary of developments during this Five Year Plan; both are provided in the pages preceding the reports of the Regional Bahá'í Councils.

Scores of thousands in this country are now walking together in the path of service. Your devoted efforts—founded in love for the Blessed Beauty, unified by fidelity to His Covenant, expressed in a common appreciation for His teachings, and fortified by trust in His unflinching assistance—will steadily and inevitably create communities that will serve as spiritual havens for our sisters and brothers in this great land. We take this opportunity to express to you once more our boundless love and deepest gratitude for your devoted and sacrificial efforts.

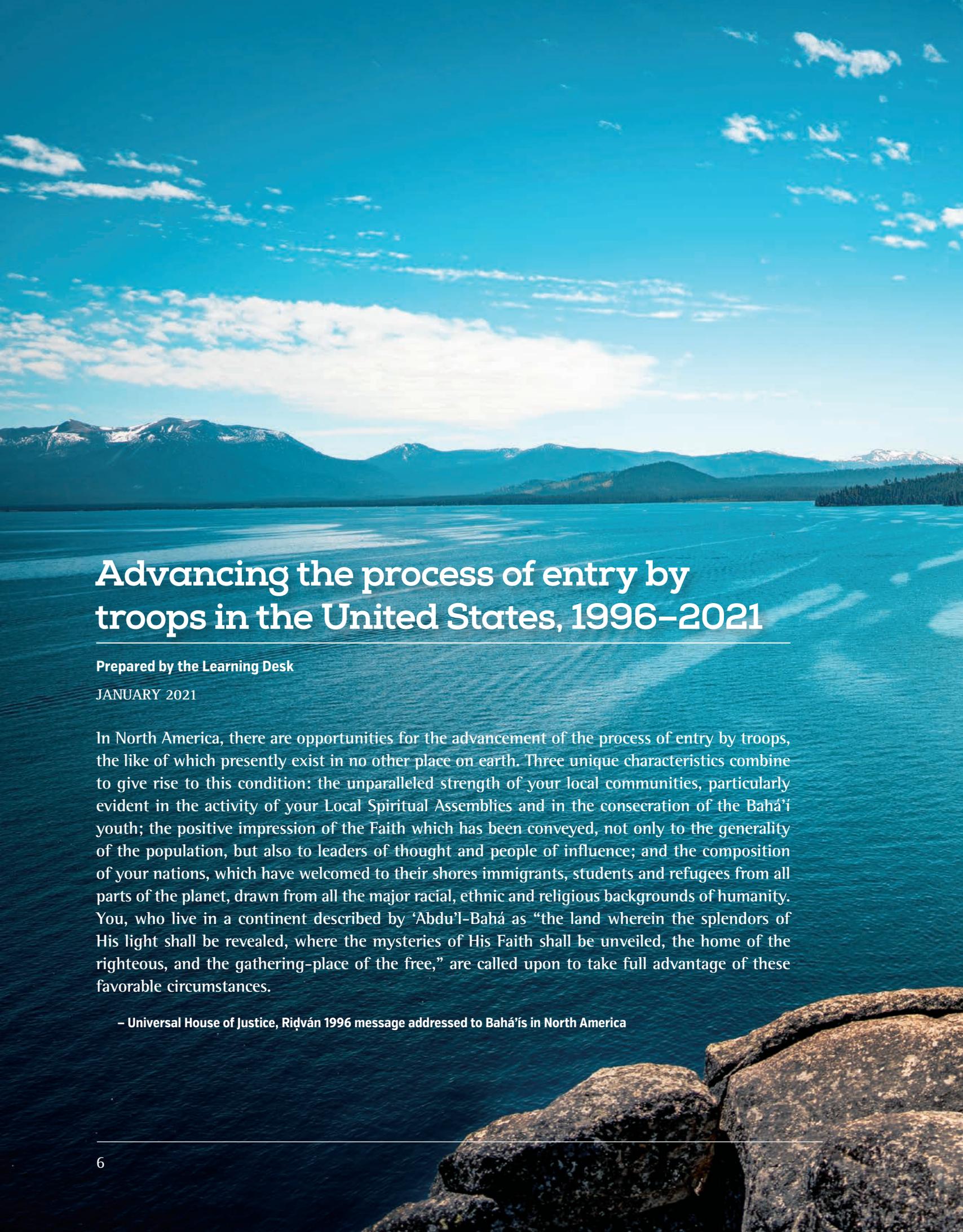
We also wish to express the abiding love and warm appreciation we feel for the members of the Continental Board of Counselors for the Americas and their Auxiliaries—as well as for the members of our 12 Regional Bahá'í Councils and Regional Training Institutes, and for those who serve with great devotion in our various offices and agencies. Their tireless services contribute beyond measure to the success and well-being of this community and, taken together with the efforts of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the nation, set the stage for wondrous achievements in the One Year Plan which now commences.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

Your devoted efforts—founded in love for the Blessed Beauty, unified by fidelity to His Covenant, expressed in a common appreciation for His teachings, and fortified by trust in His unflinching assistance—will steadily and inevitably create communities that will serve as spiritual havens for our sisters and brothers in this great land.





Advancing the process of entry by troops in the United States, 1996–2021

Prepared by the Learning Desk

JANUARY 2021

In North America, there are opportunities for the advancement of the process of entry by troops, the like of which presently exist in no other place on earth. Three unique characteristics combine to give rise to this condition: the unparalleled strength of your local communities, particularly evident in the activity of your Local Spiritual Assemblies and in the consecration of the Bahá'í youth; the positive impression of the Faith which has been conveyed, not only to the generality of the population, but also to leaders of thought and people of influence; and the composition of your nations, which have welcomed to their shores immigrants, students and refugees from all parts of the planet, drawn from all the major racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds of humanity. You, who live in a continent described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as “the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, the home of the righteous, and the gathering-place of the free,” are called upon to take full advantage of these favorable circumstances.

– Universal House of Justice, Rīḍván 1996 message addressed to Bahá'ís in North America



The first century of the Formative Age of the Cause is about to end, and with it “an extraordinary period in the history of the Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude.” The overarching aim of this 25-year period—ranging from 1996 to 2021 and encompassing a Four Year Plan, a Twelve Month Plan, and four subsequent Five Year Plans—was to accelerate the process of entry by troops, “a necessity at this stage in the progress of the Cause and in the state of human society.” This constituted the latest stage in the unfoldment of “the Divine Plan, that sublime series of letters addressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the Bahá’ís of North America between 26 March 1916 and 8 March 1917” and representing “one of the mighty Charters of His Father’s Faith.”

The Universal House of Justice has indicated that the final months of this period “will seal the foundation upon which will rest the next series of global undertakings.” Beyond that, “It will seal one hundred years of consecrated effort to consolidate and expand the foundation so sacrificially laid during the Faith’s Heroic Age.” It therefore seems timely to reflect on this remarkable 25-year period that is about to end and examine the nature of the foundation that has been laid in the American Bahá’í community.

This overview is not intended to trace the historical evolution of the last quarter-century, but rather to review some salient points—relying substantially on the assessments of the Universal House of Justice—and to identify a few of the capacities developed in the three protagonists of the Faith in the United States: the individual, the community, and the institution. It is hoped that this exercise will prove useful for discussions

on how to continue to build on these capacities and strengths in the upcoming One Year and Nine Year Plans.

Background

Just before the launching of this 25-year enterprise, the House of Justice articulated the vision that the three “inseparable” protagonists should come to “demonstrate more tangibly than ever before their capacity and willingness to embrace masses of new adherents, to effect the spiritual and administrative transformation of thousands upon thousands, and, above all, to multiply the army of knowledgeable, consecrated teachers of a Faith whose emergence from obscurity must be registered on the consciousness of countless multitudes throughout the earth.” It also noted that “those who enter the Faith must be integrated into vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will, environments in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action.”

The progress that has occurred across the Bahá’í world, including in the United States, illustrates a significant increase in the capacities of the three protagonists. Progress, the House of Justice noted, “is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community,” and it stated that this concept “lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan.”

It has become apparent that the growth of the three protagonists’ capacities has hinged on, and mirrored, the nature of their response to

guidance received from the House of Justice. In fact, one noteworthy development over this period is how widely established has become the practice of turning to the guidance, studying it, and reflecting on action in its light. The “wholehearted response of the individual believer, the community and the institutions to the guidance they received,” the House of Justice wrote, “has raised their capacity to new levels. The continued development of this capacity will remain the essential aim of advancing the process of entry by troops—the focus of the Bahá’í world through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age.”



Framework for action

A remarkable feature of this period is the systematic manner in which the Bahá’í community has learned to pursue its work of expansion and consolidation. It has internalized a mode of operation that is characterized by an iterative process of study, consultation, action, and reflection. Efforts at the grass roots draw from a growing body of global experience, and also contribute to it.

From the outset, the House of Justice encouraged “an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá’í service”; suggested “the need to be clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious”; and referred to systematization as “a necessary



mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.” It stressed that every community must learn and internalize the requisites of systematization, emphasizing the following elements: “[t]o arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, [and] to build on accomplishments.”

As a result of such an orientation of learning in action, and of responding wholeheartedly to the guidance of the House of Justice, a framework for action gradually emerged, and the Bahá’í community’s understanding of what advancing the process of entry by troops involves became deeper and more pronounced. “The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation,” the House of Justice wrote, “have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.”

Central to this framework for action is the training institute, that “instrument of limitless potentialities” that is “so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order.” It took time for a fuller appreciation of the institute process to emerge, as many different initial conceptions of what it entailed led to a range of responses. A varied body of experience was generated as many national communities developed their own curricula based on different pedagogical underpinnings. It was only in 2005 after having followed for about nine years the experience accumulating around the Bahá’í world that the House of

Justice conveyed “that the books of the Ruhi Institute should constitute the main sequence of courses for institutes everywhere, at least through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age.”

It added, “To select one curriculum to be used by training institutes worldwide for a certain period of time is not to ignore the variety of needs and interests of the friends as they endeavor to better equip themselves to understand and apply the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh.

Nor does it in any way diminish the value of the efforts made to develop courses and materials to respond to these needs. It is not intended to suggest, either, that one curriculum should necessarily appeal to everyone. What this decision does imply, however, is that the present demands of the growth of the Faith are such that, for some years to come, training institutes should not attempt to meet all of the needs and interests of the friends.”

The materials of the Ruhi Institute are a record of learning in the area of expansion and consolidation and an instrument for its systematization, assisting participants to build capabilities essential for the work of community building and teaching. The House of Justice’s guidance assisted our national community to gradually adopt and rally around the institute process and this particular curriculum. In time, this started to bear fruit in a multitude of ways.

The long-term process of capacity building in which the Bahá’í community engaged over the years was devoted “to systematizing its

experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation.” In doing so it sought to welcome all “to enter the community’s warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá’u’lláh’s life-giving message.” It is evident, the House of Justice wrote, that the institute process had “created a way for Bahá’ís to reach out to the surrounding society, share Bahá’u’lláh’s message with friends, family, neighbours and coworkers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings.” It called this outward-looking orientation “one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place.”



The House of Justice noted that “through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, [participants] are motivated

to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering.” It is encouraging in this respect to witness the significant and growing number of people who have studied and are studying institute courses, and are contributing to the building of community. For instance, around 34,000 people have studied the first book of the institute, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, and some 23,000 have studied the second one, *Arising to Serve*. The institute process has over the years proven its potential to “multiply the number of active supporters of the Faith in a self-perpetuating manner.” As a result of this focus on the institute process a fundamental shift has occurred, moving the community closer to universal participation. Growing numbers have started to



express their faith through teaching the Cause and fostering patterns of community life open to all, centered on the Word of God.

Two other now-familiar elements are the cluster, “a geographic construct intended to facilitate thinking about the growth of the Faith,” and intensive programs of growth, whose purpose is “to ensure that the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh reaches the masses of humanity and enables them to achieve spiritual and material progress through the application of the Teachings.” The establishment of clusters—currently numbering 890—has allowed for growth to be thought of and pursued on a manageable scale. It also allowed the friends to think in terms of “two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next.” The workings of the cluster-level systems that came into existence “point to an important characteristic of Bahá’í administration,” the House of Justice wrote: “Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.”

Core activities—initially study circles, devotional meetings, and children’s classes, with junior youth groups added in due time—have taken shape over this 25-year period. “Whatever the nature of the cluster,” the House of Justice wrote, “it is imperative to pay close attention to children and junior youth everywhere. Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore

it.” Particularly noteworthy was the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, which emerged from years of systematic endeavors in social and economic development by the Bahá’í community centered on literacy. This program seeks to “assist young people to navigate a crucial stage of their lives and to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.” The establishment of junior youth groups and the growth of the program contributed decisively to the overall advancement of clusters.

[Charts on page 28](#) offer a picture of the number of core activities taking place and the number of people participating, including the proportion of friends of the Faith.

Ever since junior youth groups were introduced as the fourth core activity, the program has proven its ability to work with 12- to 14-year-olds in those critical years leading to the age of maturity. Participants “come to regard themselves as agents of social change, each endowed with a twofold sense of purpose that impels them to take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual growth and contribute to the welfare of society.” Experience indicates that “the program’s beneficial effects are also apparent in the rapid moral and spiritual development of many young people, be they Bahá’ís or not, who are assisted to serve as animators.”

The House of Justice noted that the young people who are “accompanied for three years through a program that enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of fifteen ... represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization.” It furthermore indicated that

“institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth.” The growth of such systematic efforts to accompany youth, helping more and more assume their place at the forefront of the work of the Plan, represent one of the remarkable shifts in the United States during this period.

Far from seeing them merely as activities, the friends were encouraged to think of the core activities as mutually reinforcing elements of an organic process that is essentially spiritual in character, and to appreciate the dynamics of community life that together they engender. “A rich tapestry of community life,” the House of Justice observes, “begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children.”

This developing pattern of community life has begun “giving rise to vibrant and purposeful new communities wherein relationships are founded on the oneness of mankind, universal participation, justice, and freedom from prejudice,” the House of Justice noted. Even simple acts such as home visits



reinforce “ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together.” Although initially conceived “as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith,” home visits started to give rise to “an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.”

Another idea that emerged is that the processes unfolding in a cluster can be seen from two equally valid perspectives. One focuses on a three-stage educational process: the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, and the main sequence of institute courses. The other perspective looks at community growth through three-month cycles of activity.

Eventually, the concept of a series of milestones arose as a means of marking a cluster’s progress along a path of development. A concerted effort took place over successive Plans to initiate patterns of community building that would help new clusters pass the first milestone, while intensifying existing programs of growth so that they can pass the second milestone. Significant efforts in advanced clusters have allowed them to move past the third milestone. Those in clusters at that frontier of learning witnessed “the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation” and engaged in systematic learning about the various dimensions of increasing complexity that this work involves. At this frontier, for



the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.”

Additional elements

Around 2007, inspired by the guidance of the House of Justice and the content of Ruhi Institute Book 6, *Teaching the Cause*, regarding individual and collective teaching initiatives, some of the friends started seeking out densely populated neighborhoods to teach the Faith and start core activities. In certain parts of the country, early experience was generated in neighborhoods inhabited largely by recent immigrants. The response to these efforts was highly encouraging. Many people, after hearing a direct presentation of the Faith and engaging with the teacher, were moved to embrace the Cause. Families, and mothers in particular, were eager for their children to participate in children’s classes. For the Bahá’ís involved, the experience was eye-opening. They gradually overcame their own trepidation, became comfortable with direct teaching methods, and became more confident in reaching out to people beyond their immediate friends and contacts. They learned to establish connections and friendships with people previously regarded as strangers, often from different cultural backgrounds, and to share the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh with them liberally.



instance, nine clusters in our national community each have over 1,000 participants in core activities, and two of these clusters have over 500 core activities with hundreds serving thousands of participants. All this has led to impressive movement for the 626 clusters for which goals have been set. [See pages 30–31](#) for a current national picture of cluster development.

The House of Justice highlighted that “a discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative—initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops.” Emphasizing a “humble posture of learning” within the framework for action, the House of Justice said that as one result, “activities that give

expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided.

Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context



“In welcoming large numbers into its embrace,” the House of Justice wrote, the community was “learning to see more readily the latent potentiality in people and to avoid setting artificial barriers for them based on preconceived notions.” The friends also moved beyond theoretical conceptions of how the Faith would grow. Significantly, this experience helped them to see the possibilities around them, as well as the relative ease with which many people would embrace the Cause. It helped them realize this

is possible not only in other countries but also here in the United States. “At the heart of such developments,” the House of Justice noted, was “a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá’u’lláh’s message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity.”

The House of Justice noted that “immigrants—whether from the Latin regions of your own continent, across the Pacific from Asia or the Atlantic from Africa—constitute a sizeable proportion of the American population. Their sons and daughters now apparently number almost one in four of the children in your country. Among these families whose origins lie beyond your borders a vibrant sense of community is often more pronounced. Raising capacity within these populations to conduct classes for their children, and particularly to implement the program for the spiritual empowerment of their junior youth, will enhance the vitality of community-building endeavors in many clusters.”

The House of Justice observed a significant rise in individual initiative during this period, and indicated that this was nowhere demonstrated more clearly than in the field of teaching. “Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase,” it wrote. “Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá’u’lláh’s message. From among all those they

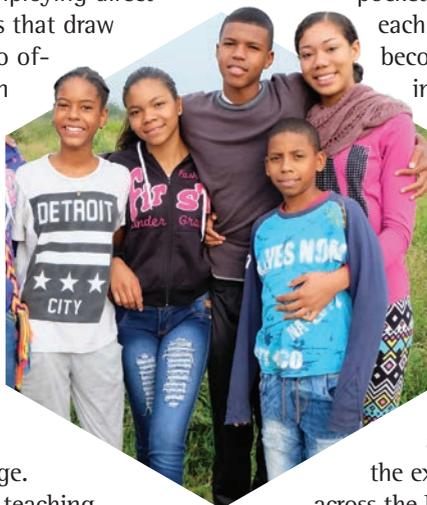
encounter—parents of neighborhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances—they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker’s needs, employing direct teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.”

Thus, the work of the Plan continued to advance in both neighborhood settings and in the clusters at large. Eventually, direct teaching in neighborhoods gave way to an emphasis on community building, particularly with a focus on growing the junior youth program. Teaching efforts had led to a significant increase in enrollments, but in order for a fuller measure of transformation to set in, it was recognized that the institute process needed to be more firmly embedded in neighborhoods and that junior youth constituted a key segment of the population in this respect. This attracted the dedicated efforts of many of the friends, particularly youth. The House of Justice noted that “youth are often at the forefront of the work in these settings—not only Bahá’í youth, but those of like mind who can see the positive effects of what the Bahá’ís have initiated and grasp the underlying vision of unity and spiritual transformation.” Also, over time a deeper appreciation developed for working with entire families and cohorts.

Eventually, a two-pronged approach came into view with respect to

advancing the work in a cluster. The House of Justice noted that “once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should become a centre of intense activity.” This conception of the work of expansion and consolidation allowed for a greater appreciation of the different ways of contributing to the work of the Plan. In fact, so rich and encouraging was the experience generated

across the Bahá’í world that the House of Justice stated: “Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order.” In the case of the United States, it observed, “The Plan’s methods and instruments endow the Bahá’í community with the means to labor effectively in every setting—from the university campus to the urban neighborhood, from the rural town to the city suburb.”



The House of Justice reminded the friends that “ultimately, it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan’s framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society.” And addressing the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States in particular, it stated that “once you are able to learn to replicate the pattern of intensive action within your most advanced clusters in the hundreds of other clusters where a program of growth has been initiated, it will be possible to engage tens, and eventually hundreds of thousands of individuals in a vibrant, meaningful and distinctive pattern of Bahá’í community life, open to all.”

Significant as well was the emphasis that messages of the House of Justice placed on the emergence of local and national Houses of Worship and how they give expression to the coherence of worship and service. A vision of the “burgeoning of a devotional spirit,” in light of the eventual development of the institution of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár*, greatly assisted the friends to appreciate more deeply the significance of their efforts to strengthen the devotional character in their clusters as well as the coherence of worship and service. This was particularly seen in clusters designated as sites for the dissemination of learning to advance the junior youth program, where the entire scheme of expansion and consolidation was often most robust.

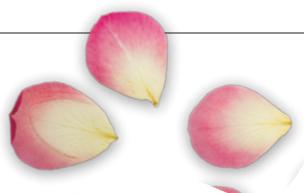
Messages from the House of Justice continued to articulate the progress being made and the continued strengthening of the Bahá’í community, witnessing “the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life” as well as

“the efflorescence of an approach to study of the writings that is wedded to action.” Furthermore, it observed “the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith.” The House of Justice also highlighted a rise in the friends’ capacity to think in terms of process, juxtaposed against “a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects.”

Over time, notions of what the Bahá’í community is also gradually began to change. Aspects of community life were opened to friends, neighbors, and coworkers from the larger society, leading to the organic multiplication of core activities, thereby vastly increasing the number of points of access for fellow citizens to interact with the Word of God. “A small community,” the House of Justice cautioned, “whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering

but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society.” As the work of expansion and consolidation in clusters continued to advance, it became clear that the friends would be “drawn further and further into the life of the society around you” and “challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours.” The House of Justice stated in this regard that “if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size.”

In this connection, the friends were asked to reflect on the nature of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, and that it “calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society.” The House of Justice noted that “the capacity created in the Bahá’í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.” It called on the friends to “reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society,” and it encouraged them “to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.” The House of Justice set before the community a vision of the magnitude of the civilization-building endeavor in which it was engaged: “an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition.” It further stated:



There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

The closing years of the first century of the Formative Age were marked by two bicentenaries, commemorating the births of the Twin Founders of the Faith, which further propelled community-building efforts. Capacity to reach out to and invite others, to share stories of the lives of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb, to teach the Faith, and to strengthen connections with society at large grew significantly during this time.

These years also saw an acceleration of the disintegrative forces in society at large. So significant was the moment that the House of Justice directly addressed the Bahá'ís of the United States, writing, "A moment of historic portent has arrived for your nation as the conscience of its citizenry has stirred, creating possibilities for marked social change." It reminded the friends, "It is not possible for you to effect the transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh merely by adopting the perspectives, practices, concepts, criticisms, and language of contemporary society." Instead, it went on, "Your approach



... will be distinguished by maintaining a humble posture of learning, weighing alternatives in the light of His teachings, consulting to harmonize differing views and shape collective action, and marching forward with unbreakable unity in serried lines." It called the friends to infuse love "into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation."

This further galvanized ongoing efforts to foster the various populations' movement toward Bahá'u'lláh, including among the historically significant African-American and Indigenous peoples. "Every community in the world," 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, "findeth in these Divine Teachings the realization of its highest aspirations." Likewise, the House of Justice noted, "every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity." It is noteworthy that the experience generated over the years with immigrant populations has also yielded insights pertinent to working with historically significant populations; and that significant efforts over the decades, for instance among African Americans, have gained new momentum in recent years in the context of the framework for action.

In describing from another angle the significance of the endeavors undertaken by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, the House of Justice noted that the friends were "working with others around them to build up and broaden a system of social organization based on His teachings" and "learning how to nurture communities that embody [the] prerequisites of peace." They stated that the devoted efforts being made by Bahá'ís and their like-minded collaborators "to build communities founded on spiritual principles, to apply those principles for the



betterment of [their] societies, and to offer the insights arising" were "the surest ways [they could] hasten the fulfilment of the promise of world peace."

Clusters at the frontiers of learning

It was particularly in the clusters at the frontiers of learning that certain dynamics of community life could be witnessed. It was also there where the friends were being drawn further and further into the life of society and were challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they were engaged to encompass a growing range of endeavors. In these vibrant clusters the friends were considering a multitude of questions generated by growth and accumulating experience. These questions concerned such matters as the flow of resources, the flow of graduates from children's classes into the junior youth program and from there into the main sequence of courses, supporting and accompanying friends in the field of service, and fostering conditions that are conducive to greater involvement in the life of society, among many others. These clusters also have seen a significant increase in the number of formal and informal spaces for neighborhood,



local, and cluster reflection. Most of these clusters have been serving as reservoirs, sharing resources and experience to assist surrounding clusters; some also serve as junior youth program learning sites.

The House of Justice noted the enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the community in advanced clusters, adding that they offer “far greater insight into what can be achieved than one in an earlier stage, where the friends are still struggling to translate the provisions of the Plan into action. It is to these more advanced clusters, then, that we must look in analyzing the accomplishments of the community, convinced that their experience will be emulated by others as they continue to progress.” The House also observed that as the spiritual foundations of the community are fortified in this way, “the level of collective discourse is raised, social relations among the friends take on new meaning, and a sense of common purpose inspires their interactions.” It further noted, “A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity.”

“The larger the presence of a Bahá’í community in a population,” the House of Justice wrote, “the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings.” It stated, “Particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers, the exhortations contained in the Bahá’í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples.” Additionally, “Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work . . . the

community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity.” Moreover, it expressed the hope: “Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead.”

In these advanced clusters, conditions are being created and patterns of community life are being fostered that allow for growing opportunities to apply the teachings toward the betterment of society. “The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning,” the House of Justice noted in addressing the Bahá’ís of North America, “will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.”

Administration

During these 25 years, significant changes occurred in the administrative aspects of the Faith, owing to advances in expansion and consolidation within clusters and the resultant increased complexity of the work. The ability of institutions at all levels to manage this complexity with even greater dexterity, the House of Justice noted, is both a sign and a necessary element of their steady maturation. “While capacity at the level of the cluster to sustain growth will remain the most compelling concern in the coming years,” the House wrote, “the ongoing development of regional and national structures to facilitate the flow of information and resources to and

from the field of action cannot be neglected.” A letter to our National Spiritual Assembly noted, “Particularly at this stage in the evolution of the Divine Plan, when the community must prepare administratively to accommodate entry by troops, [the National Assembly’s] responsibility towards the expansion of the Faith demands a high degree of devolution of administrative authority to appropriate subsidiary institutions, so that the requisites for maintaining progressive activity in the clusters can be adequately met.” It further stated that “where rapid or substantial growth is occurring, such [a decentralized mode of] management ensures that due attention is given not only to executing the plan for expansion and consolidation, but also to addressing the needs of varying patterns of growth from one area to another, to coping with emerging new realities, as well as to applying the lessons of experience in rapidly changing situations.”

As a result of changing realities and the guidance received from the House of Justice, substantial changes occurred over the years in the administrative arrangements within the national Bahá’í community. The acceleration of the process of growth and the need for decentralization also had significant implications for the organization of the Bahá’í National Center. The House stated,



“A periodic review of the mandates and the functioning of programs and offices affiliated with your National Center is necessary to ensure a suitable balance of structures and an appropriate distribution of resources at all levels.” It also encouraged the National Assembly to review its other arrangements in order “to remain fully informed of advances made in the implementation of the Plan nationwide.” Over the years many productive steps were taken in this regard.

As noted above, the development of Regional Training Institutes and their schemes of coordination, the emergence of Area Teaching Committees in many clusters, and the establishment of junior youth program learning sites were important developments. The Regional Bahá’í Councils themselves expanded in number from four to 12, now each associated with a Regional Training Institute board. Much of the work of following and encouraging expansion and consolidation—previously the purview of the National Assembly and its committees—has been decentralized to the regional level, closer to the clusters, where the work is unfolding. These developments also had significant implications for the flow of resources. To strengthen capacity for learning, from the cluster to the national level, the National Assembly established the Learning Desk in 2013.

Also noteworthy has been a shift with respect to planning. “As learning has come to distinguish the community’s mode of operation,” the House of Justice noted, “certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground.” Cluster and neighborhood reflection meetings offer opportunities for reflection and planning, as do respective spaces to consult on the experiences of those

serving as tutors, children’s class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups.

The House of Justice emphasized: “All those who aim to assist the process of learning at [the grass-roots] level must remain sensitive to conditions in individual clusters, lest frequent requests for reports or summons to gatherings—however well intentioned—sap energy or dissipate focus. Rather will they wish to do everything within their means to provide support, to lovingly encourage, to facilitate the efforts under way, and to respond, with flexibility and dispatch, to needs as they arise.” It further underscored that “those responsible for coordinating the endeavors of the friends should be ever sensitive to the natural unfoldment of the processes they oversee—conscious of when greater intensity is required in one area and when patience and encouragement are called for in another. Within each population, the path of learning will thus open up.”

With regard to Local Spiritual Assemblies, the House of Justice wrote, “For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community’s common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the

locality.” It also noted, “To administer the affairs of communities whose membership will swell into the thousands, and to fulfill their purpose as the *‘trusted ones of the Merciful among men,’* those who serve on these institutions will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead.”

As the work of expansion and consolidation and a greater involvement in the life of society have continued to advance, the House of Justice has reminded the friends to be on guard against certain habits of thought, and to strive to cultivate others. It charged the institutions and agencies of the Faith to help the friends to “analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize.” This is no small task, it noted, as “Society speaks more and more in slogans.” It expressed the “hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.”

It further noted that the friends “must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing” in society at large, “this, without feeling the least degree of superiority,



without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society.” It also encouraged the friends to seek to understand the complete vision in the messages of the House of Justice and not take phrases and sentences out of context or view them as isolated fragments. And it cautioned them also to be on guard for false dichotomies, including new ones that may arise.

Looking ahead

The final year of this historic 25-year period has brought a distinct challenge in the form of a “fast-spreading virus that has claimed many thousands of lives and severely disrupted a large share of humanity’s social and economic activity.” However, “Far from viewing the present period as simply a hiatus to be endured with patience,” the House of Justice noted, the friends “have recognized that the state of the world has made the need to render meaningful service to humanity more urgent.” It noted that “the friends everywhere have sought with characteristic creativity and determination to minister to the needs of an ailing world.”

With respect to the implications for the administration of the Faith, it noted that these challenges “will call for tremendous agility as local, regional, and national institutions seek to read their reality and stay alert to new developments.” And it further impressed upon National Assemblies that their “collaboration with the Counsellors will be of paramount importance.” This collaboration, it noted, “should be committed and sustained, an almost constant exchange of information and insight, to ensure that [they] are responding swiftly to the needs of [their] community, anticipating problems before they emerge, seizing opportunities that open up, and supporting promising initiatives.”

The House of Justice noted with regard to the state of the world that “the friends of God cannot shut themselves off from the increasing turmoil of the society that surrounds them; they must guard themselves, too, from becoming enmeshed in its conflicts or falling into its adversarial methods. No matter how bleak conditions may appear at any given time, no matter how dismal the immediate prospects for bringing about unity, there is no cause for despair. The distressing state of the world can only spur us to redouble our commitment to constructive action.” In describing the years to come, it noted, “There is a mounting realization on the part of the world’s people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face.” Against this backdrop, it is striking to contemplate the confidence with which the Bahá’í community is “about to embark upon a series of Plans that will carry it into the third century of the Bahá’í Era and significantly strengthen the Bahá’í community’s capacity for realizing the society-building powers of the Faith.”

In connection with the upcoming centennial year, which will take place in remembrance of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and of the Covenant, the House of Justice noted that it “could afford an opportunity to fulfill any goals or objectives that may in the end remain out of reach” during the Five Year Plan that is about to end. The aim of the One Year Plan to commence at Riḍván is described by the House of Justice in the following terms:

... the year will be an opportunity to consolidate the achievements made during the current Plan, while cultivating the conditions necessary for welcoming larger and larger numbers of souls into the embrace of a community



recognized for its fortitude and outward-looking orientation. At the national, regional, and cluster levels, we look to communities of proven strength to help those in which less experience has accrued. In this year-long effort, every community must draw on whatever untapped potential it may possess and seek to overcome any obstacles that are impeding its growth, thereby preparing it for the demands to come. For it is within the context of a flourishing community, especially a centre of intense activity in a village or neighbourhood, and when each element of the Plan’s framework is given the attention it requires, that those elements most visibly cohere and connect, multiplying the community’s powers in the field of action.”

Brief highlights of advances in this Five Year Plan

Prepared by the Learning Desk

In December of 2015, the Universal House of Justice set the objective of establishing 5,000 intensive programs of growth during this Plan, because, “faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá’u’lláh’s elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers.” Certainly, American society has had its share in this suffering during this time, and all can feel the urgency to address the issues that plague the nation, including its long-standing racial divide. The House of Justice made clear, however, in reminding us of the sacred responsibility given specifically to us by the beloved Master in His Tablets of the Divine Plan, that it is the movement of clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning that “will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.” For resources related specifically to the issue of racial justice, the following are available to the friends:

- A statement to the nation from the National Spiritual Assembly, “Forging a Path to Racial Justice” (republished in this volume beginning on [page 24](#))
- The growing body of experience within our community itself (a brief summary of this past year’s efforts begins on [page 26](#))

In light of the importance of clusters moving to the furthest frontiers in order to combat and eventually eradicate these forces, however, it is helpful to consider the following in relation to this Plan: the movement of clusters across the country, the development of the training institute that fuels that movement, and the mobilization of more and more believers in pursuit of the divine mission entrusted to them. A glimpse is offered here into a few highlights for each of these.

Movement of clusters

Goal of clusters moving from the first to the second milestone

At the beginning of the Plan, some 373 clusters had passed the first milestone on the continuum of growth, and originally there was a sense that all might move to the second milestone by Rıdván 2021. As work progressed, however, it became apparent that significant support would be needed to build capacity on several levels: among the friends living in first-milestone clusters, among the more-advanced clusters that would be assisting those first-milestone clusters, and among regional institutions as well. Two significant modes of thinking and acting have emerged in this process:

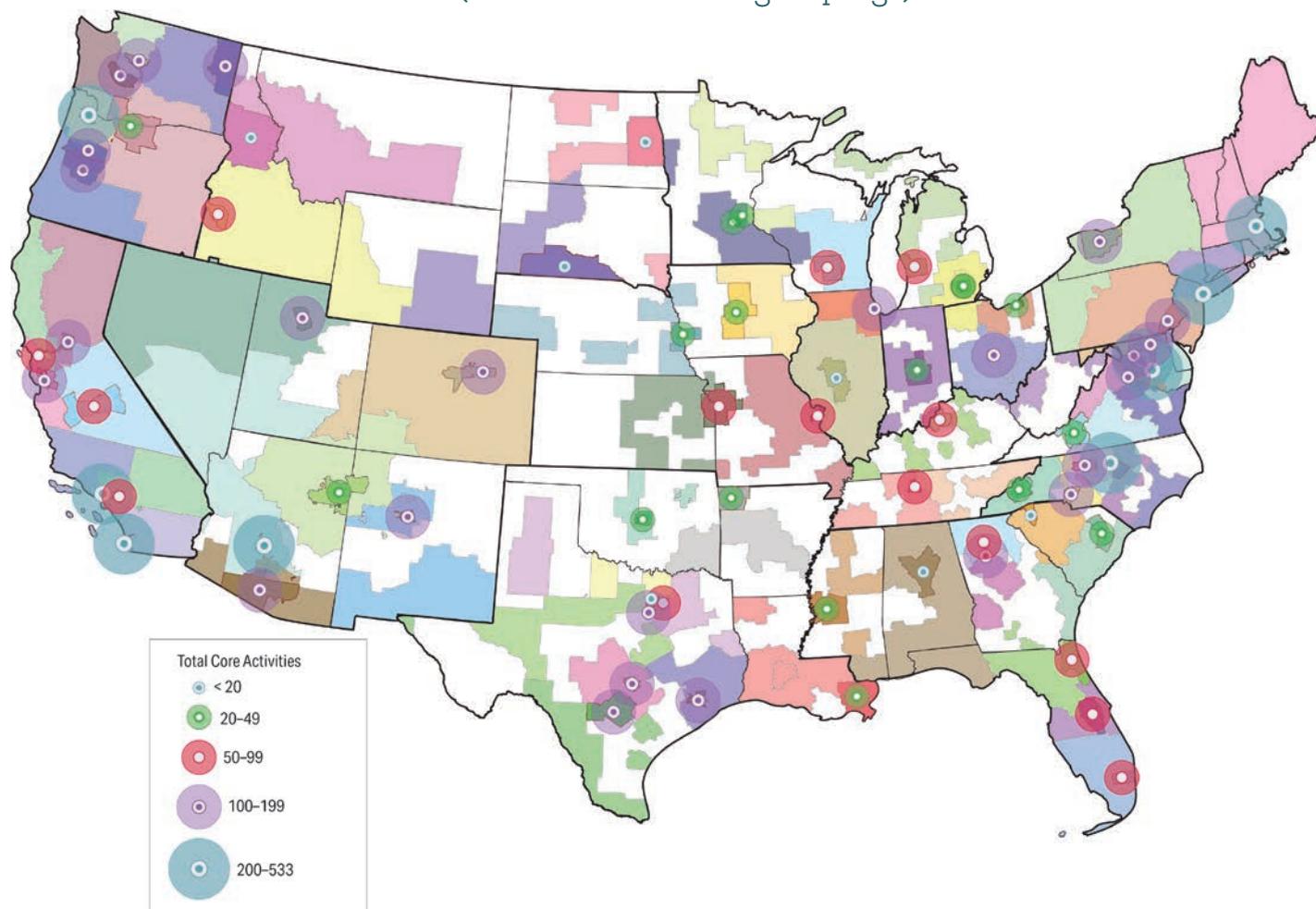
- Growing appreciation for not just the practical knowledge, but also the qualities and attitudes, necessary in the process of learning about growth and accompanying others in the field of service.
- A more-considered approach to assessing a cluster’s potential for growth, not only taking into account the number of believers, but also identifying a nucleus of friends committed to growth in a cluster, and accompanying them accordingly as the nucleus expands.

Strengthening intensive programs of growth, particularly in reservoir clusters

As it became clearer what capacities are needed to support clusters moving from the first to the second milestone, attention was given to strengthening more-advanced clusters so they could provide that support. In 2018, with the encouragement of the Counselors, most regions began to strive for at least one cluster in the region to pass the third milestone, given the vibrancy generated when capacities are built to work with larger and larger numbers of participants in the community-building process. Mighty efforts were made in advance of the Bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, and 11 of the 12 regions achieved this goal.

Core activities in reservoir clusters

(shown with cluster groupings)



At a continental gathering in Houston at the end of 2019, the vision of striving for the third milestone was extended to all clusters identified as reservoirs, so that their vibrancy could better serve the clusters surrounding them. As of this writing, in five regions all or almost all reservoir clusters have reached the third milestone. However, some may still be building the capacities needed to help nearby clusters—for instance, the capacity to sustain a flow into the institute or to establish a basic junior youth program. Some such clusters may also still need to establish centers of intense activity where the friends can learn about helping build coherent community life in a small geographic area such as a neighborhood. Fortunately, other clusters with some of these capacities can assist those near them, even if not designated as reservoirs. Also crucial for the friends in reservoir clusters are the capacities to accompany, nurture, and encourage. The One Year Plan will offer an opportunity

to consolidate these achievements; regional institutions and agencies can act to further strengthen reservoirs and third-milestone clusters and to accompany them in assisting other clusters.

The map on this page, showing approximate numbers of core activities in each reservoir cluster, conveys a sense of the growing vibrancy in the 72 groupings in our national community.

Clusters and centers of intense activity pushing the frontiers

Clusters at the frontiers of learning—which have surpassed or are striving toward sustaining 500 core activities—are tracing a path for others to learn what capacities are needed to reach the next levels of growth. In some centers of intense activity in such clusters, the efforts of

a handful of friends have grown to encompass hundreds in a pattern of community life. They are pointing a way forward for nuclei of friends that are expanding in other neighborhoods across the country, many of which have 20 or more core activities in their own right.

Within these clusters pushing the frontiers, the friends have also gained insight into:

- Identifying untapped potential within the Bahá'í community through efforts to mobilize the believers.
- Building the institutional capacity needed to operate at ever-higher levels of complexity.
- Coherently weaving in efforts that lead to an ever-greater involvement in the life of society.

At the same time they are lending assistance to sister clusters and developing a strong sense of camaraderie among friends learning together.

The capacity to learn seems to have strengthened in these places. For instance, the friends are “more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large” until “the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated.” It becomes more apparent how the elements of the framework “most visibly cohere and connect” in these clusters. With many people joining in to the pattern of community life, such settings offer the most promising conditions for an acceleration in learning about assisting large numbers of people who show receptivity to become confirmed believers.

The training institute

Each Regional Training Institute has increased its ability to nurture a learning process focused on the work in neighborhoods with youth, junior youth, and their families. In the first six cycles of the Plan, learning sites for the junior youth program assisted institutes across the country in holding seminars in reservoir clusters to invite youth into the institute, and numerous clusters gained experience in this way. The number of individuals completing the first course of the Ruhi Institute was greatest at this time (see *Table 1*) until the recent Book 1 seminars, whose effect is addressed below in the “Mobilization of the believers” section.

This collaboration between training institutes and the learning sites was intimately connected with the idea of establishing the junior youth spiritual empowerment program in clusters with intensive programs of growth. At first, neighborhood teams struggled with the demands of working with youth and junior youth at the same time. This learning process required significant time making contacts, forging new friendships, and inviting and then assisting these friends to begin walking a path of service to their communities. In regions at earlier stages of experience with the institute, a number of neighborhood teams gained experience, confidence, and unity as they learned through action. In more-advanced regions, it

allowed for a deeper exploration of concepts critical to practical action in the field.

Certain essential capacities came into focus as some regions progressed and others faced obstacles. Among these capacities are:

- The ability of those at the regional level who guide learning processes to become thoroughly familiar with those processes in the neighborhoods.
- The power to connect concepts from the guidance with practical experience.
- A common vision among a network of teams across many clusters to pursue learning about questions related to the growth of the institute in neighborhood settings.

The appointment in 2019 of resource persons for 11 of the Regional Training Institutes was a further step in strengthening efforts in regions at all stages of development.

In general, regional processes for learning about working with youth, junior youth, and their families have been concentrated on specific clusters, mostly reservoirs. Several institutes and resource persons are now considering how these processes can be extended to more clusters and neighborhood teams.

Table 1: Book 1 completions in the US Bahá'í community by six-month period

May-Oct 2016	Nov '16-Apr 2017	May-Oct 2017	Nov '17-Apr 2018	May-Oct 2018	Nov '18-Apr 2019	May-Oct 2019	Nov '19-Apr 2020	May-Oct 2020
895	822	658	615	655	609	632	588	1,051

Source: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, conducted every six months; latest is for period ending Oct. 31, 2020

Study circles

Study circles have seen the greatest growth among the three educational core activities, with the total number of study circles increasing in this Plan by 75 percent nationwide and doubling in some regions. Eight regions have more than doubled the number of friends of the Faith in study circles, suggesting that the believers are

learning more and more to see the potential for the institute to reach beyond the Bahá'í community. There is additional room for growth in this respect, as friends of the Faith make up a quarter of participants in US study circles (see Table 2).

Table 2: Progress of study circles in the US Bahá'í community year by year

	Nov 2015-Oct 2016	Nov 2016-Oct 2017	Nov 2017-Oct 2018	Nov 2018-Oct 2019	Nov 2019-Oct 2020
Study circles	1,854	1,744	1,919	2,157	3,275
Participants	7,618	6,753	7,213	7,898	12,418
Friends of the Faith	1,645	1,766	1,846	2,253	3,060

Source: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, conducted every six months; latest is for period ending Oct. 31, 2020

Junior youth spiritual empowerment program

Of the three educational imperatives, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program has the highest number of friends of the Faith involved—both

numerically and by percentage, as roughly three-quarters of the junior youths in the program across the country are not registered as Bahá'ís (see Table 3).

Table 3: Progress of junior youth groups in the US Bahá'í community year by year

	Nov 2015-Oct 2016	Nov 2016-Oct 2017	Nov 2017-Oct 2018	Nov 2018-Oct 2019	Nov 2019-Oct 2020
Junior youth groups	710	695	714	811	882
Participants	4,271	3,938	4,202	4,870	4,860
Friends of the Faith	3,247	3,004	3,297	3,933	3,715

Source: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, conducted every six months; latest is for period ending Oct. 31, 2020

The number of clusters with five to 10 junior youth groups has doubled during this Plan (see Table 4). Though this number is still small relative to the number of programs of growth in the country, it seems to confirm what has been learned about the challenges of growing the program: accompanying youth from the larger community to consistently animate a group is quite demanding and more complex than, say, teaching a children's class.

The South Central region's growth in this area is singular. Since the Dallas learning site for the junior

youth program was established early in the Plan, the numbers of groups, overall participants, and friends of the Faith in the South Central region have all nearly doubled. Additionally, large numbers of Bahá'í youth have been mobilized across North Texas.

Appreciation for the program has certainly grown throughout the country during this Plan; since 2017, the number of clusters with at least one group has grown by 100, a most encouraging development.

Table 4: Cluster-level growth of the junior youth program among 626 goal clusters

Clusters with 1-4 groups		Clusters with 5-10 groups		Clusters with 11+ groups	
2017	2020	2017	2020	2017	2020
140	235	16	34	9	11

Source: Cluster Growth Profiles drawn from Statistical Report Program

Children's classes

Children's classes might naturally be expected to grow alongside the other educational imperatives, but the total nationwide numbers seemed to plateau in the middle of the Plan. However, the reality in some areas may look quite different, particularly in the most advanced clusters, and regional and cluster institutions can examine the strengths of children's classes more fully. It is also encouraging that friends of the Faith have accounted for some 60 percent of Bahá'í children's class participants throughout the Plan (see *Table 5*).

Table 5: Progress of children's classes in the US Bahá'í community year by year					
	Nov 2015-Oct 2016	Nov 2016-Oct 2017	Nov 2017-Oct 2018	Nov 2018-Oct 2019	Nov 2019-Oct 2020
Children's classes	970	899	827	972	1,031
Participants	5,861	5,252	4,726	5,643	5,565
Friends of the Faith	3,252	3,221	3,093	3,691	3,469

Source: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, conducted every six months; latest is for period ending Oct. 31, 2020

Mobilization of the believers

This Plan saw a significant advance in learning to mobilize the company of the believers, particularly as hosts of devotional gatherings and, in the most recent cycles, tutors of Ruhi Book 1. Institutions and agencies at the cluster, regional, and national levels have shown increasing effectiveness in calling for action and assisting the friends in this regard.

A clear outcome of efforts related to devotionals has been the community's deepening awareness of the significance of this core activity—"occasions where any soul may enter" and "inhale the heavenly fragrances"; "the embryo of the local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*" that can "kindle the stirrings of the spirit and ignite the flame of service." Further, the believers' appreciation for the power of divine assistance and for the need to cultivate the devotional character of the community has also grown. A question going forward is how to sustain this activity and further cultivate these capacities.

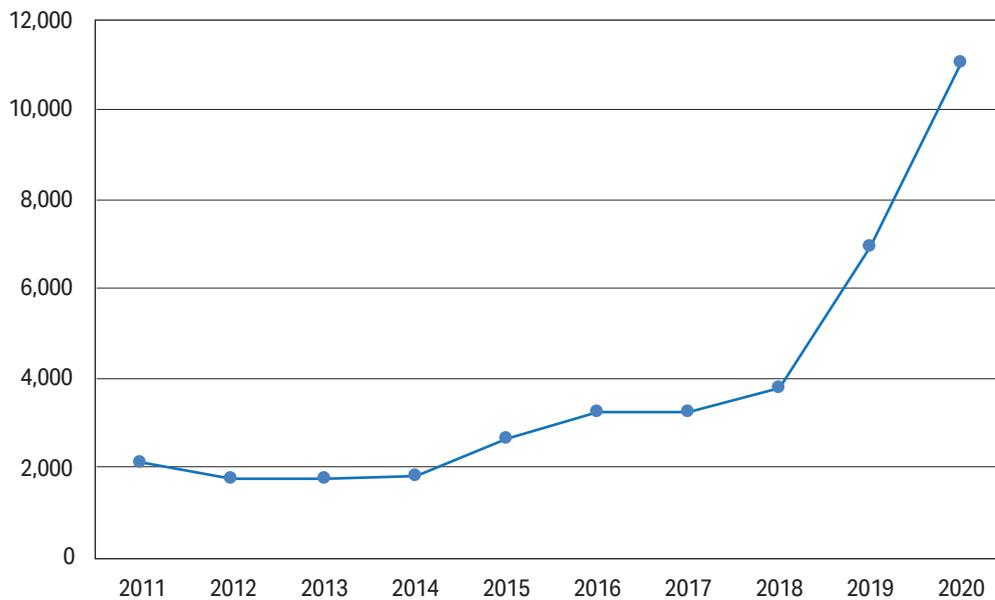
In the two years between the bicentenaries, a number of regions set ambitious goals to establish new devotional

gatherings in the thousands, as an offering to the Blessed Beauty for the Bicentenary of His Birth and that of His Forerunner. By October 2019, the country as a whole had more than doubled the number of devotional gatherings, increased the number of participants by more than half, and almost doubled the number of friends of the Faith participating. This past year saw an even greater advance, as a global pandemic, heightened awareness of racial injustice with resulting social unrest, and challenges in the political sphere caused turmoil in the larger society. It was in the midst of this that the National Assembly called on every Bahá'í household to host a regular devotional gathering, and the community of the Greatest Name in the United States arose to the challenge. Thus, in comparison with the beginning of the Plan, the current number of devotional gatherings has more than tripled, and participation has doubled—both overall and by friends of the Faith (see *Table 6*). Over the past 10 years, this stands out as exponential growth (see *chart at top of page 23*).

Table 6: Progress of devotional gatherings in the US Bahá'í community year by year					
	Nov 2015-Oct 2016	Nov 2016-Oct 2017	Nov 2017-Oct 2018	Nov 2018-Oct 2019	Nov 2019-Oct 2020
Devotional gatherings	3,241	3,212	3,755	6,932	11,046
Participants	22,505	22,447	24,889	38,930	49,113
Friends of the Faith	6,378	6,307	6,592	11,616	12,554

Source: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, conducted every six months; latest is for period ending Oct. 31, 2020

Exponential growth of the number of devotional gatherings in recent years



Source: Five Year Plan Progress Surveys

It is important to note that devotional gatherings are not evenly distributed across the 626 clusters with programs of growth. As of February 2021, those clusters that had passed the third milestone accounted for well over half of the devotional gatherings and their participants in the country. About 40 percent of these clusters are in the Atlantic States or California. Meanwhile, the more than 300 clusters at the first milestone, more than half the country by area, had roughly only 10 percent of these gatherings (see Table 7).

Another significant advance was in the confidence gained by the generality of believers to invite receptive individuals in their networks to study the sequence of institute courses and enter the path of service, especially following the series of seminars on the new edition of Ruhi Book 1 held over summer and fall 2020. Coinciding with social unrest related to racial injustice as well as the conditions of the pandemic, these seminars allowed large numbers to review the new

content of Book 1 and renew their understanding of the institute’s transformative power and its relevance to the country’s social issues. The nationwide results speak for themselves: more Book 1 courses were completed in the past six months than in any other comparable period during the Plan.

The capacities built over the course of this latest Plan, as well as in this whole series of Plans, poise the national community for the preparations to be made during the One Year Plan and the subsequent Nine Year Plan, whose duration “already gives an unmistakable indication of the expansive prospect it will present” and which launches us into a series of Plans that “will significantly strengthen the Bahá’í community’s capacity for realizing the society-building powers of the Faith.” As the House of Justice expressed, may we “succeed in giving hope to those who know not where to find it” in our continued systematic and consecrated efforts to bring Bahá’u’lláh’s elixir to a suffering society.

Table 7: Concentration of devotional gatherings in advanced clusters, February 2021

	Percentage of all US gatherings	Percentage of all US participants	Percentage of all friends of the Faith participating in the US
Milestone 3 (9.5% of all programs of growth)	55%	52%	51%
Milestone 2 (39.5% of all programs of growth)	37%	40%	38%
Milestone 1 (51% of all programs of growth)	8%	9%	10%

Source: Cluster Growth Profiles drawn from Statistical Report Program

Forging a path to racial justice

A message from the Bahá'ís of the United States

June 19, 2020

The Bahá'ís of the United States join our fellow-citizens in heartfelt grief at the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others whose lives were suddenly taken by appalling acts of violence. These heartbreaking violations against fellow human beings, due only to the color of their skin, have deepened the dismay caused by a pandemic whose consequences to the health and livelihoods of people of color have been disproportionately severe. This has come to pass against a backdrop of longstanding racial injustice in virtually every aspect of American life. It is clear that racial prejudice is the most vital and challenging issue we face as a country.

Yet, amidst these tragedies, there are also signs of hope. Countless citizens have arisen to proclaim the truth that we are one nation, and to demand specific actions to address the pervasive inequities that for too long have shaped our society. We have remembered who we aspire to be as a people, and are determined to make a change for the better. This moment beckons us to a renewed commitment to realize the ideal of *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one—the very ideal upon which America was founded.

To create a just society begins with recognition of the fundamental truth that humanity is one. 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. It implies a reordering of our society more profound than anything we have yet achieved. And it requires the participation of Americans of every race and background, for it is only through such inclusive participation that new moral and social directions can emerge.

Whatever immediate results might come from the current demonstrations, the elimination of racism will require a sustained and concerted effort. It is one thing to protest against particular forms of injustice. It is a far more profound challenge to create a new framework for justice. Our efforts can only succeed when we learn to build relationships with each other based on sincere friendship, regard, and trust, which, in turn,



Jose Desmarais/Getty Images Plus via Getty Images

become pillars for the activities of our institutions and communities.

It is essential for us to join hands in a process of learning how to create models of what we want to see in every dimension of American life, as we learn to apply the principle of oneness through practical engagement and experience. To this end, we offer the following thoughts.

An essential element of the process will be honest and truthful discourse about current conditions and their causes, and understanding, in particular, the deeply entrenched notions of anti-Blackness that pervade our society. We must build the capacity to truly hear and acknowledge the voices of those who have directly suffered from the effects of racism. This capacity should manifest itself in our schools, the media, and other civic arenas, as well as in our work and personal relations. This should not end with words, but lead to meaningful, constructive action.

There are already significant efforts underway to learn how to create models of unity in neighborhoods and communities throughout the nation. Bahá'ís have been persistently engaged in such efforts for many years. The aim is not unity in sameness—it is unity in diversity. It is the recognition that everyone in this land has a part to play in contributing to the betterment of society, and that true prosperity, material and spiritual, will be available to us all to the degree that we live up to this

standard. We should earnestly discover what is being done, what truly helps to make a difference, and why. We should share this knowledge throughout the country as a means of inspiring and assisting the work of others. If we do this, we could soon find ourselves in the midst of a mass transition toward racial justice.

Religion, an enduring source of insight concerning human purpose and action, has a key role to play in this process. All faith communities recognize that we are essentially spiritual beings. All proclaim some version of the “Golden Rule”—to love others as we do ourselves. Take, for example, the following passage from the Bahá’í Scriptures in which God addresses humankind:

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.

To understand and firmly believe that we are all children of God provides us with access to vast spiritual resources, motivating us to see beyond ourselves and to work steadily and sacrificially in the face of all obstacles. It helps to ensure that the process is consistent with the goal to create communities characterized by justice. It gives us the faith, strength, and creativity to transform our own hearts, as we also work for the transformation of society.

We believe that the tribulations now encompassing much of the world are the symptoms of humanity’s failure to understand and embrace our essential oneness. The interrelated threats of climate change, gender discrimination, extreme wealth and poverty, unfair distribution of resources, and the like, all stem from this deficiency and can never be resolved if we do not awaken to our dependence upon each other. The world has contracted to a neighborhood, and it is important to appreciate that what we do in America impacts not only our own country, but the entire planet.

We should also never forget that the richness of our diversity, and our founding ideals of liberty and justice, attract the eyes of the world to us. They will be influenced by what we achieve, or fail to achieve, in this regard. It is not an exaggeration to say that the cause



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of world peace is linked to our success in resolving the issue of racial justice.

The oneness of humanity is the foundation of our future. Its realization is the inevitable next stage in our life on this planet. We will replace a world society based upon competition and conflict, and driven by rampant materialism, with one founded upon our higher potential for collaboration and reciprocity. This achievement will mark the universal coming of age of the human race. How soon we achieve this, and how easily, will depend upon the commitment we demonstrate to this cardinal principle.

We have come to a moment of great public awareness and rejection of injustice. Let us not lose this opportunity. Will we commit to the process of forming “a more perfect union”? Will we be guided by “the better angels of our nature” to choose the course of wisdom, of courage, and of unity? Will we choose to truly become that “city upon a hill” to serve as inspiration to all humanity? Let us then join hands with each other in commitment to the path of justice. Together we can surely achieve this.

Bahá’u’lláh said: “*So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.*” May that light grow brighter with every passing day.

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHÁ’ÍS
OF THE UNITED STATES

Race unity efforts in the Bahá'í community

In the distressing events of 2020–21, a year like no other in recent memory, the American Bahá'í community heard an emphatic call to action to redouble its efforts to contribute a “decisive share to the eradication of racial prejudice” from the fabric of the nation.

Numerous Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith arose in response to act in the realms of community building, social action, and participation in discourses—the three fields of endeavor emphasized by the Universal House of Justice—with renewed perspective drawn from a fresh examination of pertinent sacred and authoritative writings. Sometimes, these initiatives brought stark reminders of the “long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls” stretching ahead. At the same time, they offered glimpses of the possibilities released when the friends, as encouraged by the Supreme Body, act and interact with “love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among the members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being.”

For decades, the urgency of the call to address the inequities of race in America had been impressed upon the Bahá'í community. Major messages from the National Spiritual Assembly reflected this urgency, offering reminders of the great spiritual destiny forecast for the country and the solemn responsibilities both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi had made it clear the realization of such a destiny would entail. Local efforts sprang up in such forms as core activities facilitated through the lens of racial issues, discussion and film groups, many social action projects, and more. The work of community building, especially in neighborhoods or Indigenous communities with intensive activity, showed early glimmerings of spiritual and social empowerment. On the national level, race discourse officers were appointed in the Office of Public Affairs; the curriculum for seasonal schools was focused on striving toward racial unity in the process of building community; and programs on applying the Bahá'í teachings on racial justice were developed at the Bahá'í House of Worship.

Then in late May 2020, the widely condemned killing of George Floyd—only a few hundred feet from the city's Bahá'í Center—made Minneapolis the epicenter of national racial turmoil. As a number of Bahá'ís responded



rapidly, they built the capacity to operate a food bank at the Center, contributing to a community of service that came together organically in the largely African-American area. This role was found and nurtured through loving and attentive conversations, honest reading of the area's troubled history and fresh trauma, carefully developed relationships, and reflection and adaptation regarding the best ways to carry out that service.

Amid the widening outcry for social justice, an extraordinary letter from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the United States, as well as the National Spiritual Assembly's June 19 message to America (printed in its entirety on [pages 24–25](#)), helped lend impetus to waves of service in varied forms across the country:

- With capacity and relationships built over time, people in numerous neighborhoods initiated projects to address needs that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed among underserved minority and immigrant populations: for example, a food drive in Bridgeport, Connecticut, with hours of volunteering by neighbors and members of a junior youth group; a mask-making and distribution project in Kansas City, Missouri, that utilized tailoring skills in the community; and





a community garden in Raleigh, North Carolina. Public celebrations of unity grew from the building of relationships, often at the neighborhood level, in Arlington, Texas; Fort Wayne, Indiana; and Vancouver, Washington.

- Online and in-person gatherings for prayer, study, and discussion on healing racial trauma grew in at least a dozen states, with some participants saying they have been spaces for “[people] of color to share their experiences of the heart” and for white friends to “listen and learn with an open heart.”
- Even as the national Office of Public Affairs worked to organize a high-level symposium on race unity, Bahá’ís spearheaded initiatives as sweeping as the National Race Amity Conference, annually based in Boston for a number of years; as organic as continuing devotional and study gatherings across the South associated with the 2019 ARISE Pupil of the Eye gathering; as established at the grass roots as Parent University, which fosters empowering conversations on the future of neighborhoods in Savannah, Georgia; and as small-scale as study circles geared toward the spiritual components of racial awareness in Atlanta, Nashville, and Brookings, South Dakota.
- Local Spiritual Assemblies launched learning processes focused on race in such localities as Everett, Washington; Las Vegas, Nevada; Tampa, Florida; and Fargo, North Dakota—perhaps walking a path blazed by the local Assembly in Washington, DC, which has spent years building a framework of community life that cultivates respectful action in matters of race and class.
- Outreaches at the permanent national Bahá’í schools reinforced movements toward justice in varied ways. They included a series of dialogues on race at Green Acre with police in Eliot, Maine; theater and discussion with the involvement of Louhelen to empower

minority youth and families in Flint, Michigan; and continued programs of study, devotionals, and conversation initiated by Bosch to help Spanish-speaking families in Northern California build capacity and empowerment.

- Youth conferences in several regions were aimed at raising awareness of the components of racial injustice and how the activities of community building can contribute to its healing, with a strong emphasis on developing a culture of service.

The Bahá’í House of Worship in Wilmette invited communities in various parts of the continent to contribute Holy Day programs for online participation, and among them have been devotionals honoring Alaska Native and African American heritage.

- The continuing video series titled *A Rich Tapestry*, created collaboratively by US Bahá’í Media Services and independent producers, offered video stories on Navajo friends building community, Hispanic and African immigrants cultivating relationships in Phoenix, and a deep look into a community of service in Minneapolis.

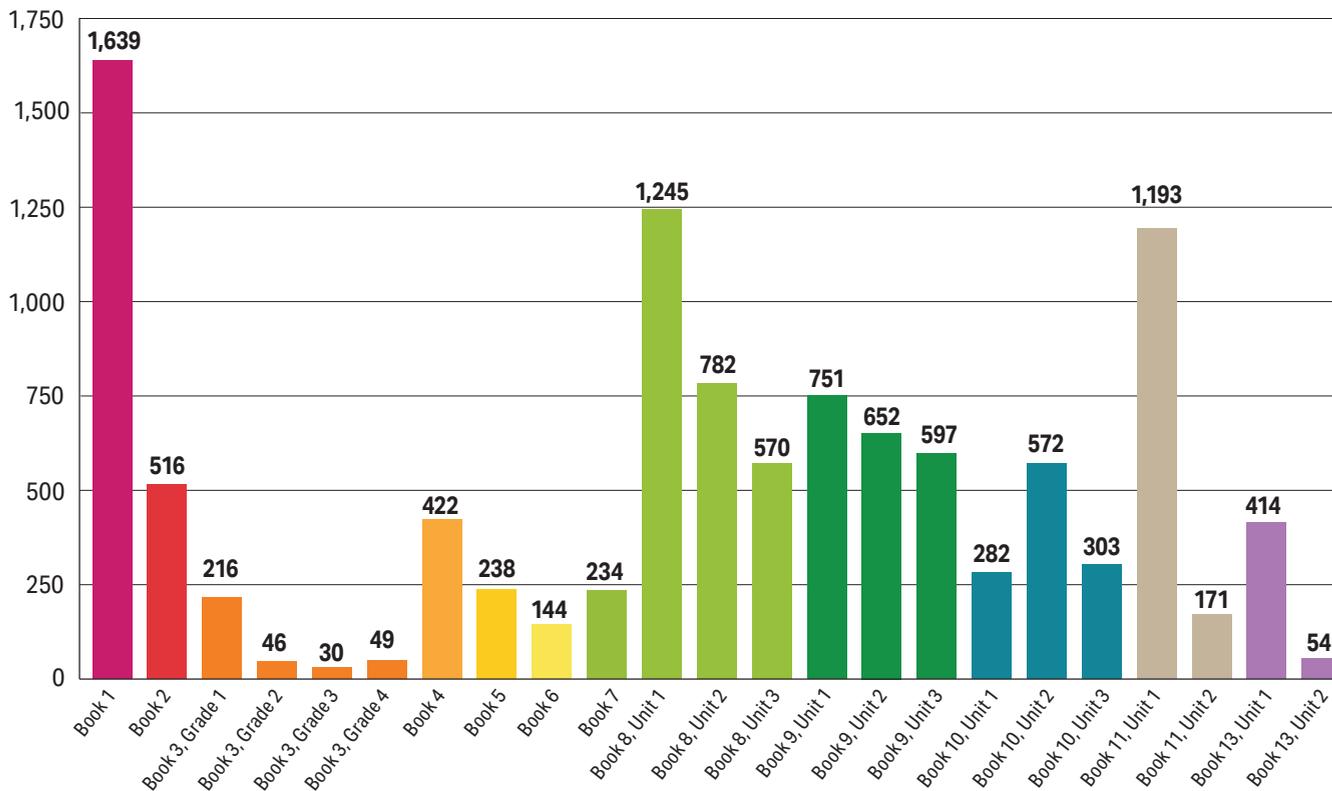


Materials and reports from dozens of these initiatives have been compiled on a Race Unity Action resources website (at www.bahai.us/race-unity-action), created by the national Office of Communications as a repository of resources for communities to gain inspiration and ideas.

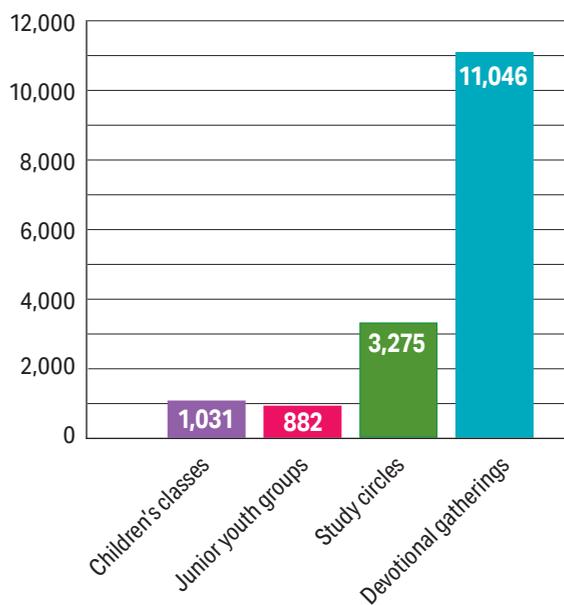
The strictures necessitated by the pandemic proved a hurdle, not a barrier, to these efforts. As close contact between neighbors and friends becomes safer, and as those involved continue learning about using the power of the Bahá’í revelation to erode long-standing systems of division and injustice, time will tell how the creative and loving energy from these activities can become even more transformative.

NATIONAL STATISTICS OVERVIEW

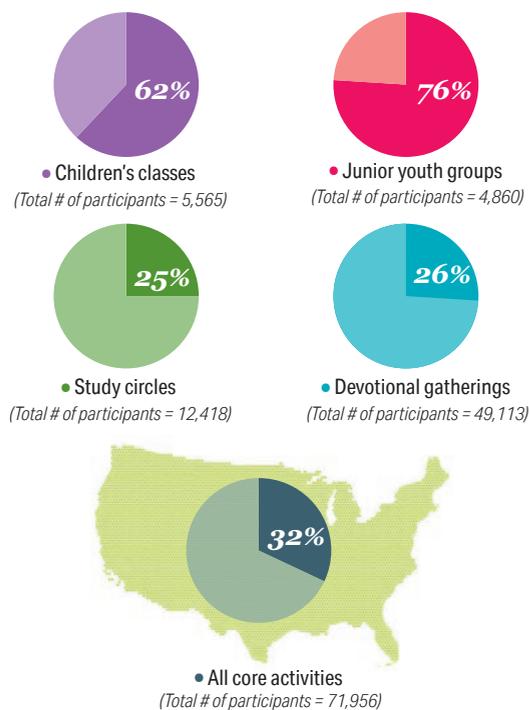
11,120 books of the Ruhi Institute completed during 12 months ending October 31, 2020



Core activities underway as of October 31, 2020

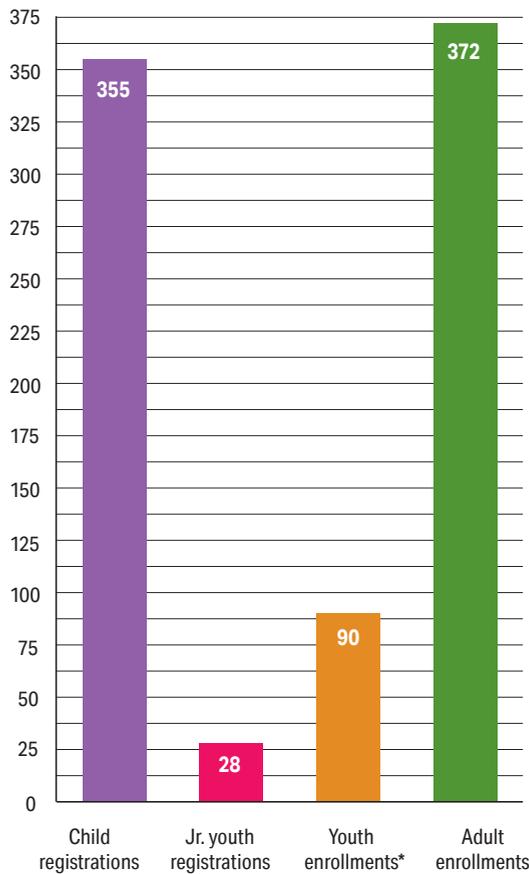


Friends of the Faith in core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020 reporting cycles.

845 new Bahá'ís in 12 months



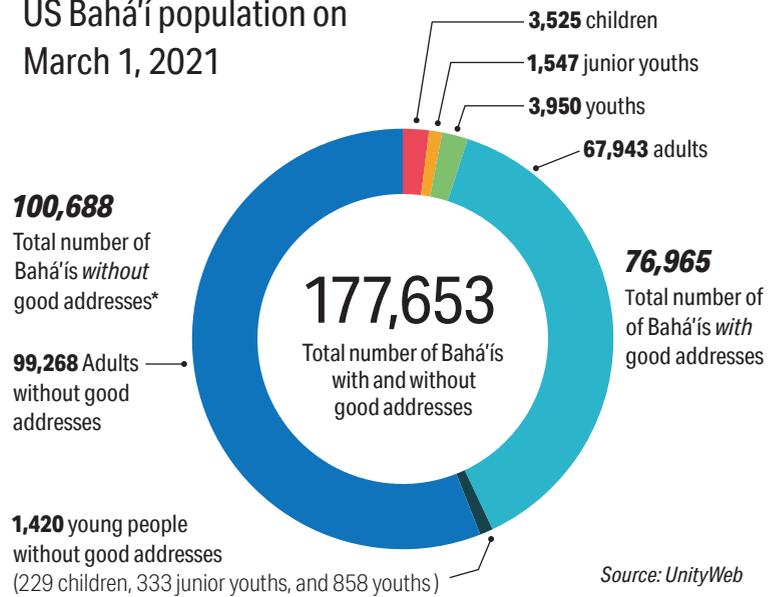
*Does not include several hundred Bahá'ís who were registered as children and turned 15 during the year.
Source: UnityWeb, for the year ending March 1, 2021

944 Local Spiritual Assemblies by region

Region	# of Assemblies
Appalachian States	19
Atlantic States	83
State of California	201
Four Corners States	88
Heartland States	57
Midwestern States	41
Northeastern States	78
Northern Plains States	26
Northwestern States	109
Prairie States	29
South Central States	85
Southeastern States	128

Source: National database, as of February 11, 2021

US Bahá'í population on March 1, 2021



*Believers without good addresses are unable to receive direct mailed communications from the National Spiritual Assembly.

Selected membership statistics in 12 months

Deaths reported*	716
Withdrawals	253
Transfers out of USA	230
New USA arrivals	213
Returning to USA	169
Membership reinstatements	32

Source: UnityWeb, for the year ending March 1, 2021

*This figure likely represents many more deaths than actually took place during the year, as a campaign to track Bahá'ís without good addresses has confirmed many deaths from past years.

Homefront pioneers

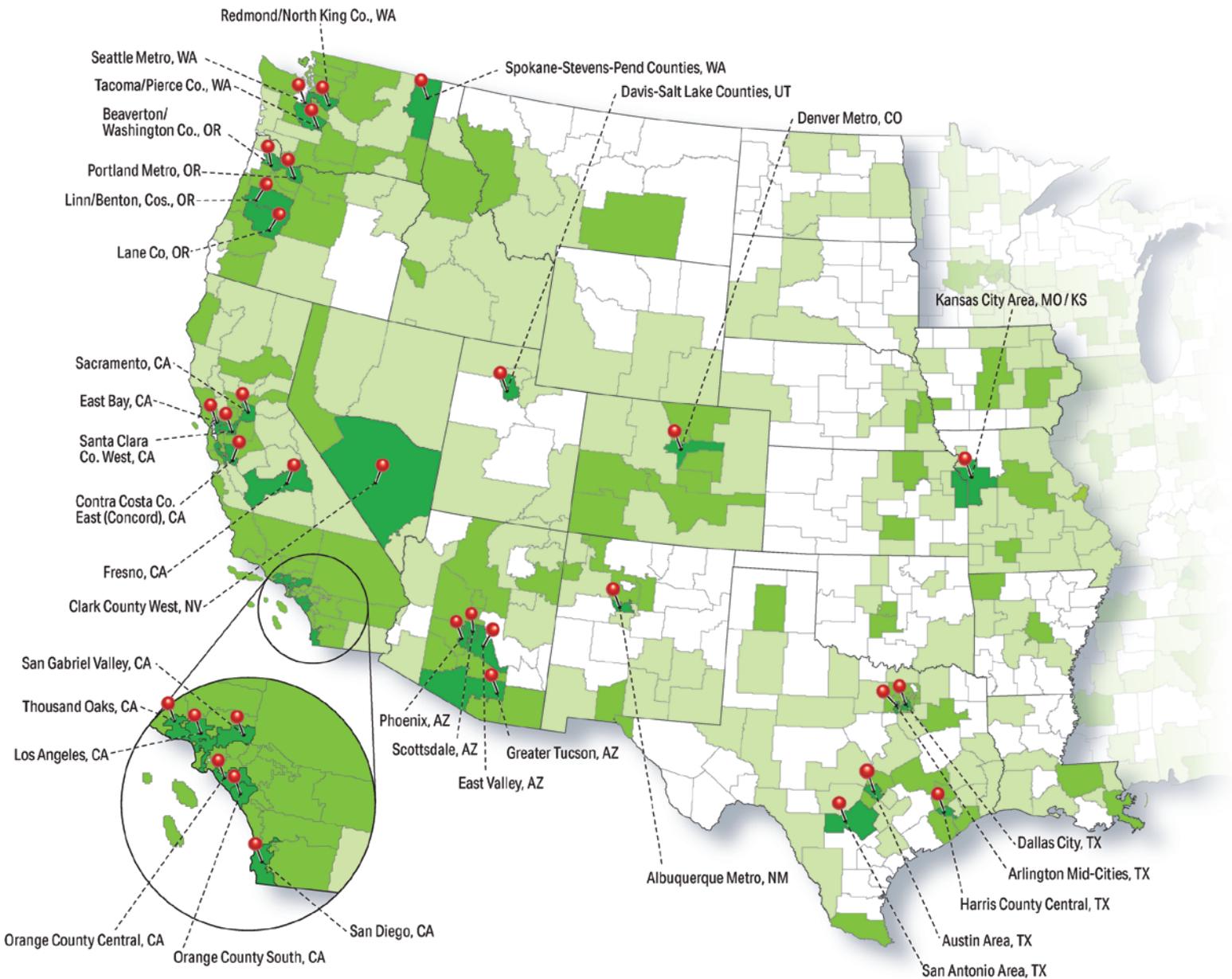
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



See the Regional Bahá'í Council reports for region-by-region numbers.

The assistance of the National Statistics Office, which provided all statistics presented on these pages, is gratefully acknowledged. Its semiannual reports also constituted the standard of accuracy for all national and regional statistics presented elsewhere in this Annual Report.

P R O G R A M S

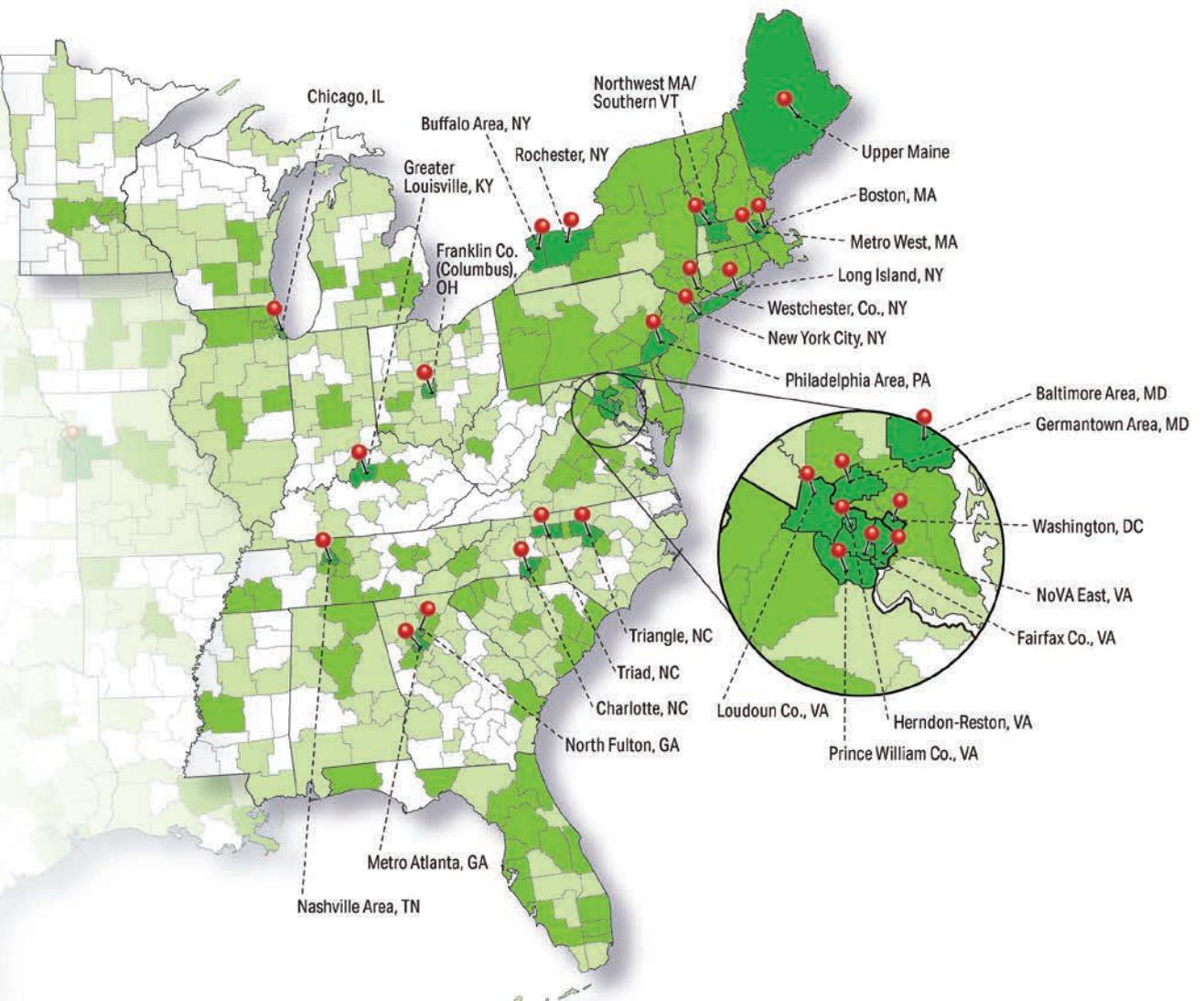


- Milestone 1** has been passed — cluster has a program of growth
- Milestone 2** has been passed — cluster has an intensive program of growth
- Milestone 3** has been passed — the pattern of activity embraces large numbers

Milestone	Programs of growth
Milestone 3 clusters	60
Milestone 2 clusters	248
Milestone 1 clusters	318
Total	626

Source: Unity Web, March 2021

O F G R O W T H



Region	Total number of clusters	Milestone 1	Milestone 2	Milestone 3
Appalachian States	56	17	13	2
Atlantic States	81	34	25	11
State of California	65	19	35	11
Four Corners States	77	27	21	8
Heartland States	78	29	20	1
Midwestern States	73	36	10	1
Northeastern States	47	6	31	10
Northern Plains States	55	18	4	0
Northwestern States	43	11	21	8
Prairie States	75	35	9	1
South Central States	128	37	29	5
Southeastern States	112	49	30	2
USA	890	318	248	60

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Advancements in programs of growth

Five clusters that had achieved the first milestone on the continuum of growth advanced to the second this year. Despite restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the friends living there rallied around the goals of the Five Year Plan, meeting regularly via telephone and Zoom. A nucleus of friends accompanied them—including Auxiliary Board members, Council members, and others—as they studied guidance, analyzed their reality, reflected, planned, and acted in concert. Further, one cluster has newly passed the third milestone as of this report, and it is anticipated that one more currently at the second milestone, with about 65 core activities in place, will pass the third milestone by Rīḍván.

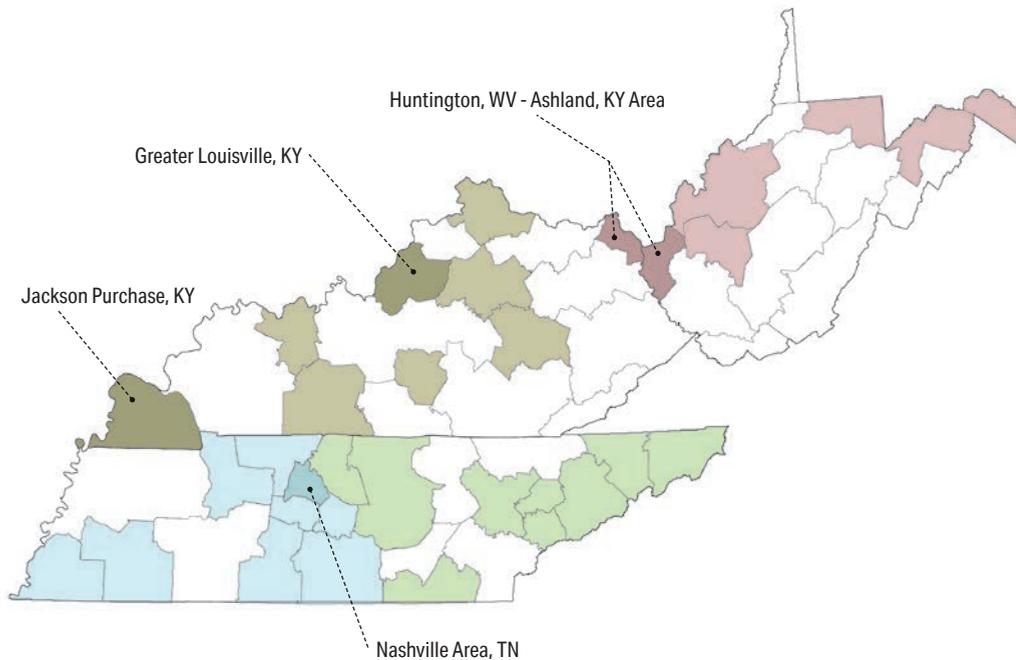
The pandemic challenged community-building work in progress in the neighborhoods. Friends on neighborhood teams maintained budding relationships

both through “front-porch” visits and safely distributing care packages. After a few months, they were able to resume certain activities.

Strength of institute training

The Regional Training Institute board co-ordinated a series of training seminars for the revised Ruhi Book 1, drawing in 55 tutors. Some 24 new Book 1 study circles have been initiated to date. A second series prepared 44 tutors to lead studies of the revised Ruhi Book 2, further revitalizing the institute process across the region. The seminars incorporate reflection and planning sessions, which are then replicated at regional and sub-regional levels. Occasions to aid the friends’ thinking about how to invite others to participate in community-building activities are being cultivated. In another notable initiative, study of all three units of Book 8 has been undertaken with groups of African-American friends. Study circles have also been offered in Persian.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Participation in core activities

Devotional gatherings led increases in core activities across the region. Bahá'ís and members of the larger community gathered in well over 300 regular devotionals, approaching twice the number from the previous year. At least two factors contributed directly to this growth: The National Spiritual Assembly asked every family and household to hold regular devotionals, and 15 cluster-level teaching conferences increased the friends' understanding of the key role devotionals play in community life.

Unanticipated circumstances also spurred growth in devotionals. The pandemic and the national wave of protests for racial justice each, in its own way, increased receptivity in the larger community, and the transfer of meetings from in-person venues to teleconference platforms made devotional gatherings and meaningful conversations easier for some to access. To contribute to an expansion in the number of devotional programs, the Council has provided Zoom accounts for clusters and created

a website where friends across the region can share devotional programs.

While the pandemic has made it more difficult to hold children's classes and programs for junior youth, friends in at least three clusters have been able to continue children's classes via Zoom. Teachers have employed creative ways to incorporate art, drama, music, and stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá into their virtual gatherings.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

Finding ways to inspire the friends to pioneer on the home front continues to challenge the Appalachian region, especially in the case of rural clusters. Efforts in this regard were hampered by the pandemic, which limited the ability of the friends to travel to clusters currently at the first milestone.

Mobilization of youth

The region is learning how to improve its efforts to assist youth to become protagonists in the community-building work. Young people are among the most

Some clusters experienced difficulty maintaining connections with young people from the larger society after stay-at-home orders and the practice of social distancing went into effect. Others have stayed in contact and found creative ways to engage and further relationships. Even effective efforts, however, advance sporadically owing to ever-changing local policies aimed at containing the pandemic.

The pandemic and the national wave of protests for racial justice each, in its own way, increased receptivity in the larger community, and the transfer of meetings from in-person venues to teleconference platforms made devotional gatherings and meaningful conversations easier for some to access.



active participants in animator reflection gatherings and strengthening the institute gatherings. Efforts made prior to the pandemic to assist a cohort of youth to become tutors stalled in March. Some clusters experienced difficulty maintaining connections with young people from the larger society after stay-at-home orders and the practice of social distancing went into effect. Others have stayed in contact and found creative ways to engage and further relationships. Even effective efforts, however, advance sporadically owing to ever-changing local policies aimed at containing the pandemic.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

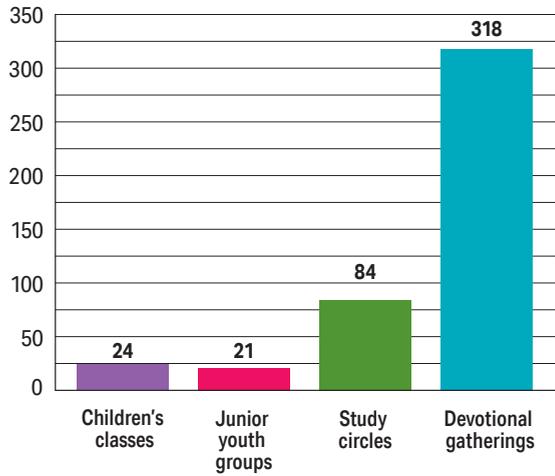
Along with the increase in the number of devotional gatherings across the region, an increase in the diversity of participants and spaces where devotionals take place has enriched and deepened the devotional character of communities in the region's clusters. The gatherings

include family and household devotionals as well as online prayer meetings with friends, neighbors, coworkers, study circle and children's class participants, and friends from like-minded organizations in the larger community. The richness of conversations around spiritual themes has opened up opportunities to introduce friends to the community-building work of the Faith, in some cases leading to the launching of social action initiatives.

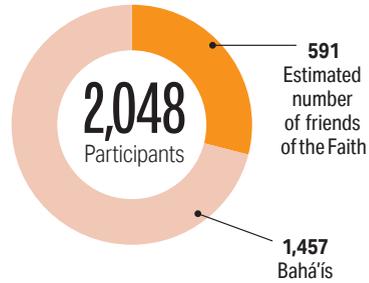
Additional comments

Other noteworthy developments in the Appalachian States include a regional newsletter and an expansion in collective teaching campaigns using social media. The newsletter aims to share experience in the field and to encourage the friends as they pursue the goals of the Plan. The number of clusters with social media teams increased from one to three. All three teams met in December to share learning.

447 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



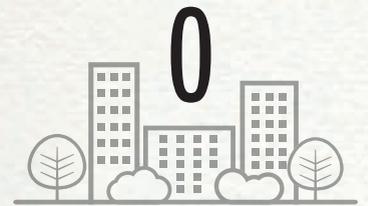
Overall participation in all 4 core activities



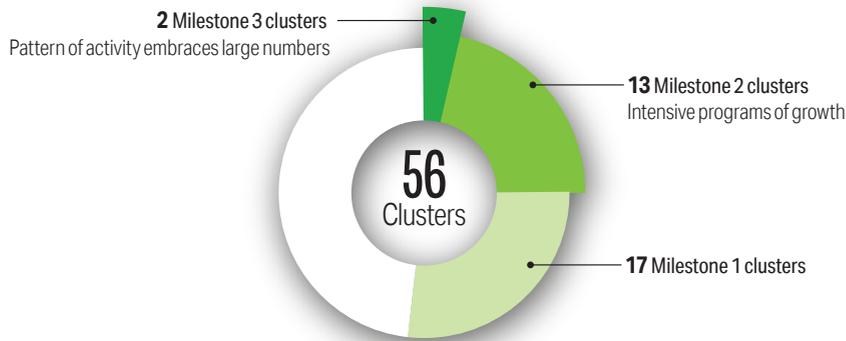
Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

Homefront pioneers

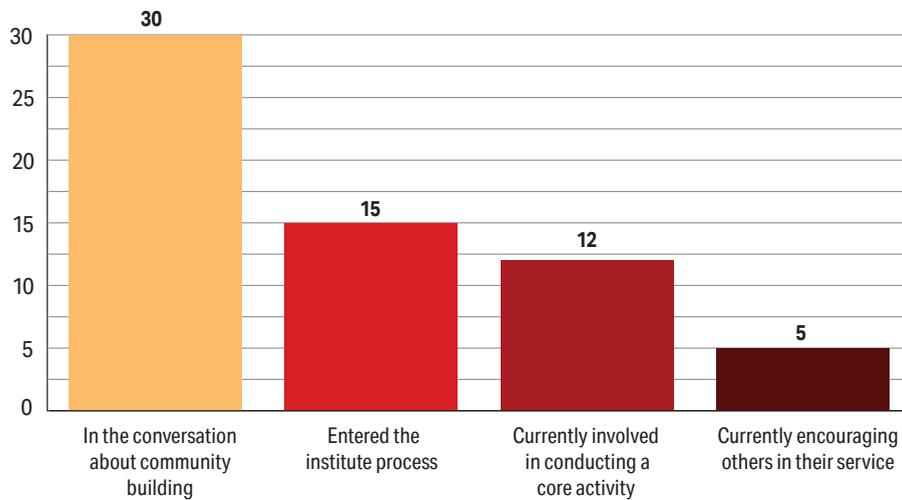
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



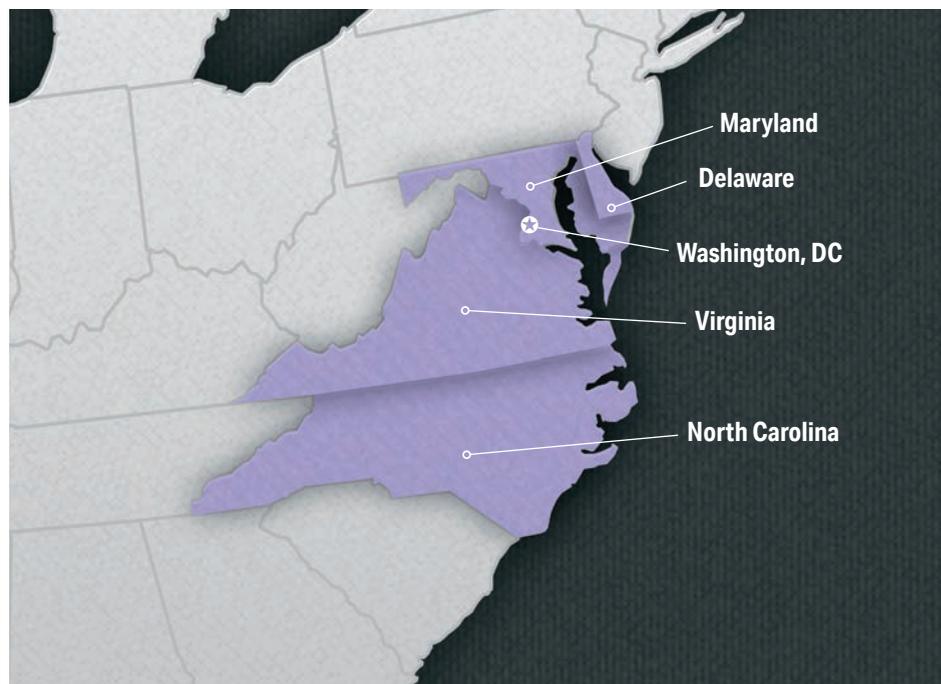
Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



More than 100 tutors participated in a Ruhi Book 1 seminar that began last summer. These seminars deepen understanding of the content and purpose of Book 1 and raise the capacity of tutors to invite others to join in the institute process, particularly friends from the larger society. Over 200 new Book 1 study circles begun since July have attracted more than 700 participants, 45 percent of whom are friends of the Faith.

Advancements in programs of growth

Several clusters advanced to the next stage of development on the continuum of growth during 2020–21, with three becoming intensive and at least five (with a sixth projected by *Riḍván* 2021) beginning to embrace larger numbers. With the support of a nearby reservoir cluster, an additional cluster established a program of growth in fall 2020, which is projected to become intensive by *Riḍván* 2022.

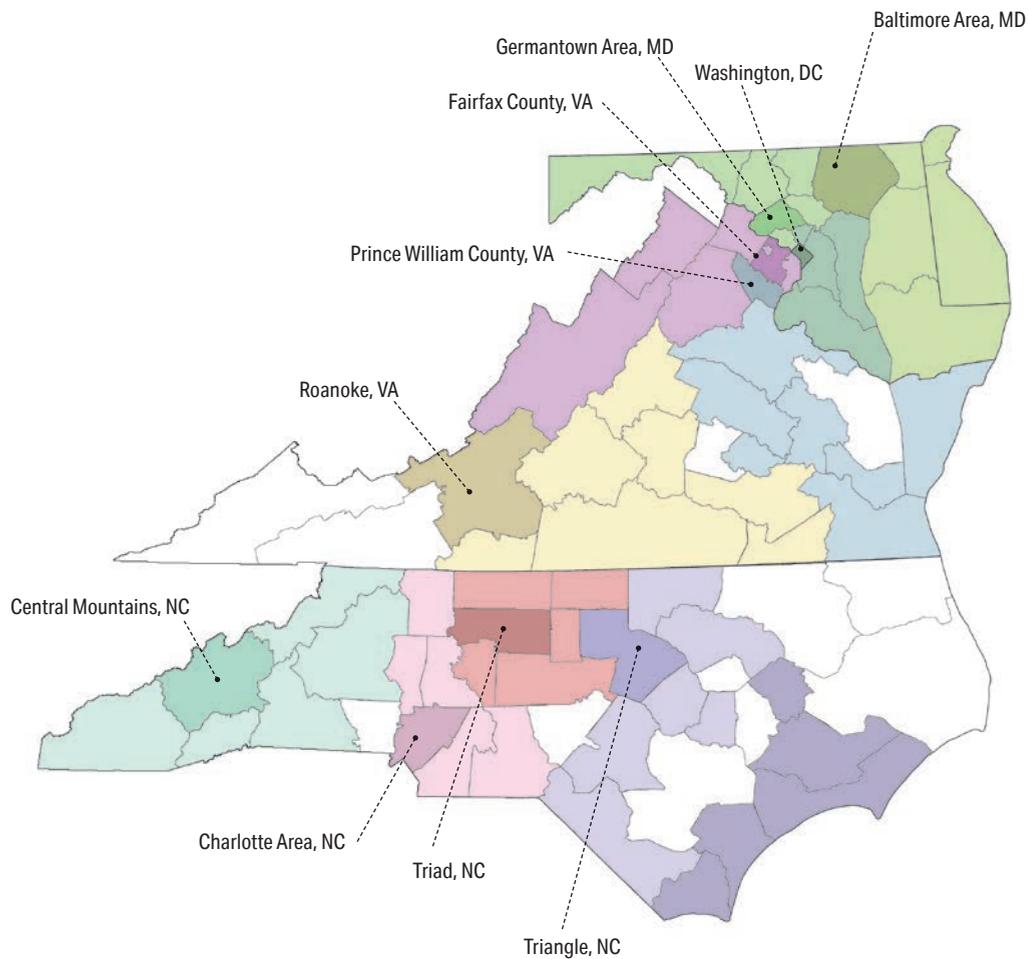
Along with 25 clusters that have passed the second milestone and at least 11 at the third, well over 20 goal clusters ripe for development are the focus of earnest and collaborative attention.

Strength of institute training

A number of developments strengthened the region's institute training during 2020–21. More than 100 tutors

participated in a Ruhi Book 1 seminar that began last summer. These seminars deepen understanding of the content and purpose of Book 1 and raise the capacity of tutors to invite others to join in the institute process, particularly friends from the larger society. Over 200 new Book 1 study circles begun since July have attracted more than 700 participants, 45 percent of whom are friends of the Faith. More tutors also incorporate into the process time for planning and reflection, which serves as a springboard to accompany their collaborators in the practices and to foster mutual support and assistance. As a result of these advances, many Book 1 circles become portals to participation in devotional gatherings and to the study of Books 2 and 3. Meanwhile, the majority of those who complete the Book 1 seminar advance to a seminar for Book 2; many also share what they learned with their local communities.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Meanwhile, an emphasis on upper-level courses has proven effective in engaging the generality of believers. This year, the region established learning teams around the implementation and quality of Books 8 and 9. Books 11 and 13 are now offered in the most advanced clusters. The first study circles on Book 12 are also poised to launch by Riḍván.

In particular clusters, we are learning how to engage African-American and Nepali-Bhutanese friends, among other populations of historical significance. These friends are beginning to enter the ranks of those facilitating growth, whether in formal or informal roles. While this requires continued attention and cultivation, glimmerings of a bright future can already be appreciated.

Occasions for regional and subregional reflection continue to take place every three to four months. These gatherings sharpen collective vision for the growth of the institute, organizing action around the pursuit of capacity development.

Participation in core activities

The region added some 800 core activities this year, including increases in the numbers of children's classes and junior youth groups, a remarkable feat given the limitations of the pandemic. Devotional gatherings grew by more than 600. The number of study circles rose by 15 percent. Participation in the region's almost 3,000 activities increased by 18 percent to around 11,000. While the number of friends of the Faith

In particular clusters, we are learning how to engage African-American and Nepali-Bhutanese friends, among other populations of historical significance. These friends are beginning to enter the ranks of those facilitating growth, whether in formal or informal roles.

Consultations among regional institutions are entirely revitalizing homefront pioneering—from identifying and confirming pioneers, to their preparation and deployment, to continuing accompaniment. Along with further development of mobile tutors and traveling teachers, this facet of growth compels attention in a region that seeks to secure more than 20 new intensive programs of growth.



taking part in children's classes dropped somewhat, their participation in study circles increased by 13 percent and held steady in devotional gatherings and junior youth groups. The total number of friends of the Faith engaged in activities hovers around 3,800.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

Several additional pioneers were deployed this year to areas with smaller, and in some cases, older Bahá'í communities. Consultations among regional institutions are entirely revitalizing homefront pioneering—from identifying and confirming pioneers, to their preparation and deployment, to continuing accompaniment. Along with further development of mobile tutors and traveling teachers, this facet of growth compels attention in a region that seeks to secure more than 20 new intensive programs of growth.

Mobilization of youth

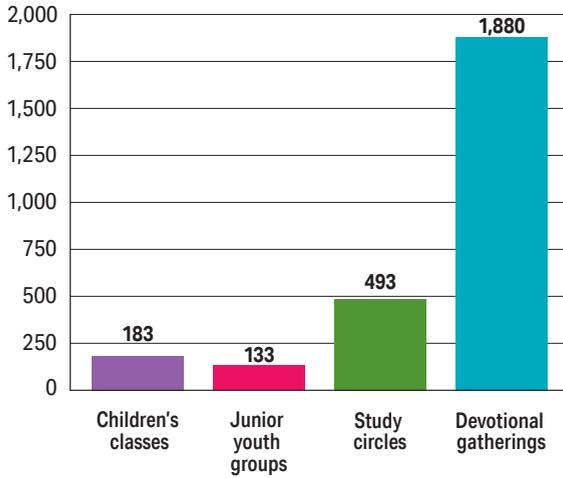
More than 40 youths began hosting core activities this year, bringing the number of youth facilitators to more than 315, a third of whom now accompany others in the community-building work. A few of these friends are serving as mobile resources—in one case, as a pioneer—for clusters at the first milestone.

The pandemic called for a fresh approach in the organization of youth-focused summer campaigns, encouraging the region to increase its use of social media as a tool. Along with outreach to youth through existing networks and community organizations, these efforts complemented the region's ability to sustain youth camps during school breaks and holidays, which took place virtually and, in some instances, outside and in person.

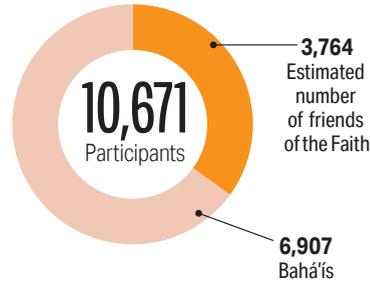
Establishment of a permanent facility for institute training

Continued growth of the Regional Training Institute has shown that the time is propitious to establish a permanent facility in the region for institute training. As a result of consultations including the regional institutions, our Counselor, and the National Spiritual Assembly, a decision has been taken to locate this first facility in the cluster situated in North Carolina's Triangle, which presently sustains over 540 activities with 2,550 participants.

2,689 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



Overall participation in all 4 core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

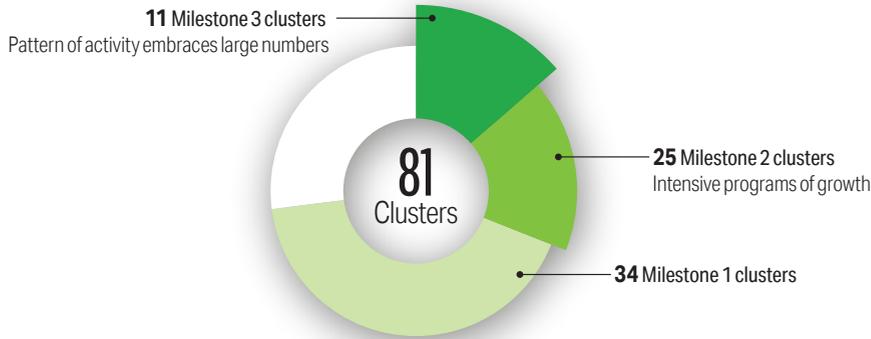
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

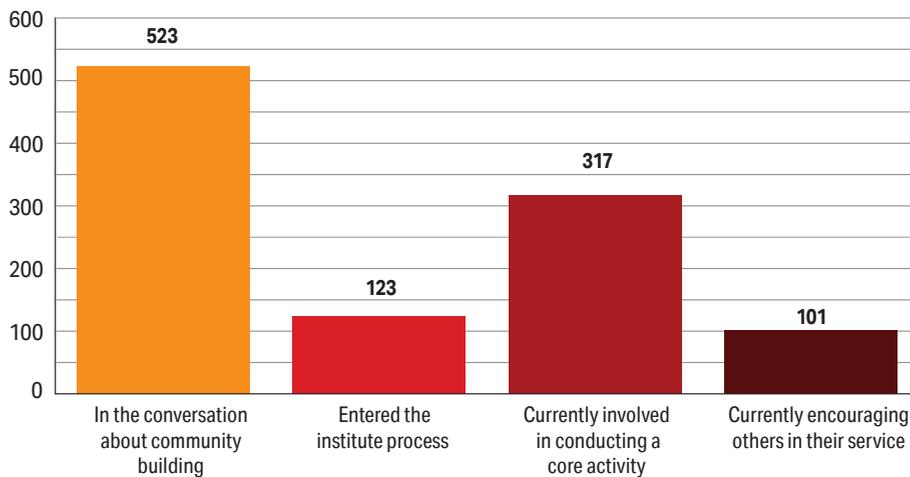
12



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



Regional Bahá'í Council of the **State of California**



When teaching conferences were held to set the stage for increased participation in the processes of growth, most of the region was forced to meet in virtual spaces. Initial trepidations about the effects of the required physical distancing soon gave way to a sense of empowerment and innovation in methods and approaches. In total, some 700 friends studied the materials, with good results.

The year 2020–21, the fifth of the Five Year Plan, saw a dramatic change in the context of teaching work in California as the region, together with the rest of the world, faced a significant health crisis that necessitated extensive preventive measures.

Advancements in programs of growth

Immediately prior to the pandemic, the region was preparing for a series of teaching conferences to set the stage for increased participation in the processes of growth. The Continental Counselors developed the conference study material, which was to be uniform throughout North America and known as the “grassroots material.” While the Los Angeles cluster was able to hold its conference in person prior to the introduction of lockdown conditions, the rest of the region was forced to meet in virtual spaces. Initial trepidations about the effects of the required physical

distancing soon gave way to a sense of empowerment and innovation in methods and approaches. In total, some 700 friends studied these materials, with good results.

The number of clusters in the region maintaining over 100 core activities increased from six to 11 in the past year—quite an accomplishment during a period of pandemic-related restrictions. Nor was progress limited to these 11 clusters. All clusters, including those approaching the first and second milestones on the continuum of growth, have made progress. At least two goal clusters at the first milestone have moved beyond the second, and two additional clusters that had recently attained the second milestone are now expected to reach the third before *Riḍván* 2021. Meanwhile, the Los Angeles cluster has surpassed the 500-activities mark and is now aiming for the next, as-yet-undefined, milestone.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Meanwhile, the 100 friends who serve as members of the region's 40 Area Teaching Committees (ATCs) have continued to help hundreds of teaching teams and "expanding nuclei" to reach a much larger community of interest. While all ATCs have enjoyed regional occasions for reflection and the exchange of experiences and ideas, two summits held for the most advanced clusters reaped the greatest harvest of lessons learned, infusing participants with great excitement about the possibilities that lie ahead.

Strength of institute training

Significant progress was made in strengthening the institute training process. The introduction of the newly revised first and second books of the Ruhi Institute gave those active in the work fresh impetus, and well over 500 individuals were trained to use these books in their teaching efforts. This resulted in scores of new study circles involving youth and friends of the Faith. Regional occasions for reflection in the most advanced clusters continued unabated during 2020–21, and the friends took the opportunity to reflect on actions taken and to analyze the effectiveness

The introduction of the newly revised first and second books of the Ruhi Institute gave those active in the work fresh impetus, and well over 500 individuals were trained to use these books in their teaching efforts. This resulted in scores of new study circles involving youth and friends of the Faith.

One increasingly popular new practice has seen teachers of children's classes and their helpers create care packages for each child containing songs, lessons, prayers, and delicious treats, then drop these off at their homes. Teachers follow up by calling each family to go through the lessons, practice the songs and prayers, and inquire from the parents about the well-being of their families. In this way, parents, including those who are friends of the Faith, have become more involved in the spiritual education of their children.



of methods and approaches. Documents emerging from these occasions comprise a repository of accumulated learning in how to raise up dedicated and effective tutors, animators, and teachers.

Participation in core activities

Regional Council members marvel at the rapid increase in the number of core activities taking place, but even more striking is the significant increase in the number of friends of the Faith who are consistently involved. While children's classes and junior youth groups have needed adjustments, the participation of youth and adults in study circles and devotional gatherings has increased significantly.

One increasingly popular new practice has seen teachers of children's classes and their helpers create care packages for each child containing songs, lessons, prayers, and delicious treats, then drop these off at their homes. Teachers follow up by calling each family to go through the lessons, practice the songs and prayers, and inquire from the parents about the well-being of their children and their entire families. In this way, parents, including those who are friends of the Faith, have become more involved in the spiritual education of their children. In essence, virtual home visits with parents are now integrated into the educational process. Opportunities

have been created for clusters to learn from one another, since these innovative practices are ripe for experimentation and learning.

Mobilization of youth

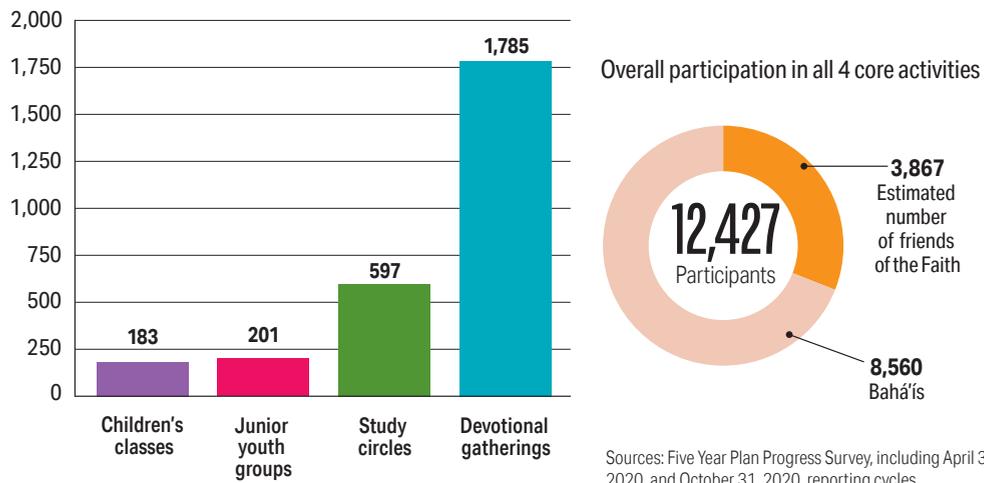
The summer of service program for youth also continued, with over 50 young people offering a period of full-time service. By employing a combination of virtual spaces and outdoor activities in parks—where necessary precautions were observed—these young people made new friends and strengthened activities in selected clusters.

The youth year of service program received an added measure of strength through the services of a full-time resource person. The number of youths giving a full year of service doubled from four to eight this year. In addition to a rigorous program of teaching and learning, these youths have started documenting their services by creating short video narratives, which are then distributed over social media and can be used to recruit new youths for next year.

Additional comments

For their devoted services throughout the region, the Council wishes to express its gratitude to the Counselors assigned to California and their Auxiliary Board members.

2,766 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



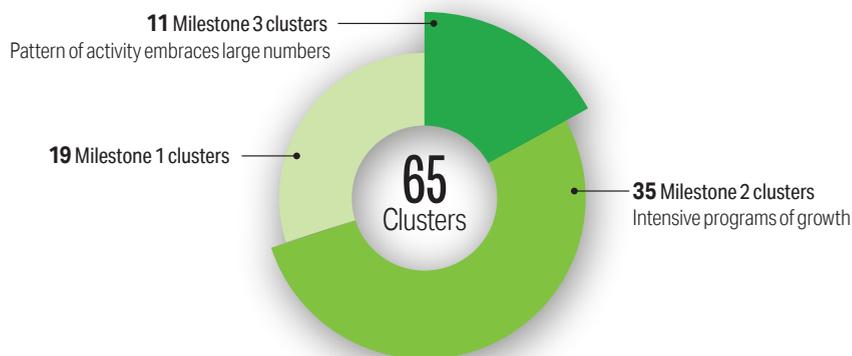
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

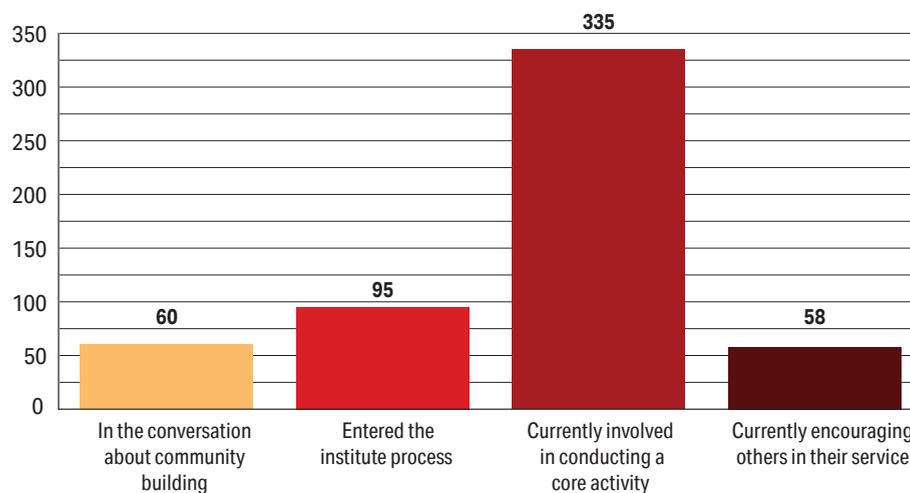
15



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



As the friends actively embraced the National Spiritual Assembly's call for every Bahá'í household to host a devotional, they realized how this seemingly simple activity has the power to transform the lives of families and entire communities, and momentum started to build.

The friends in the Four Corners region exemplified admirable resilience and dedication to the Cause during 2020–21, the final year of the Five Year Plan. Rather than allowing the restrictions necessitated by the pandemic to force them to take a step backward, Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith arose with enthusiasm to continue community-building efforts in their clusters.

Advancements in programs of growth

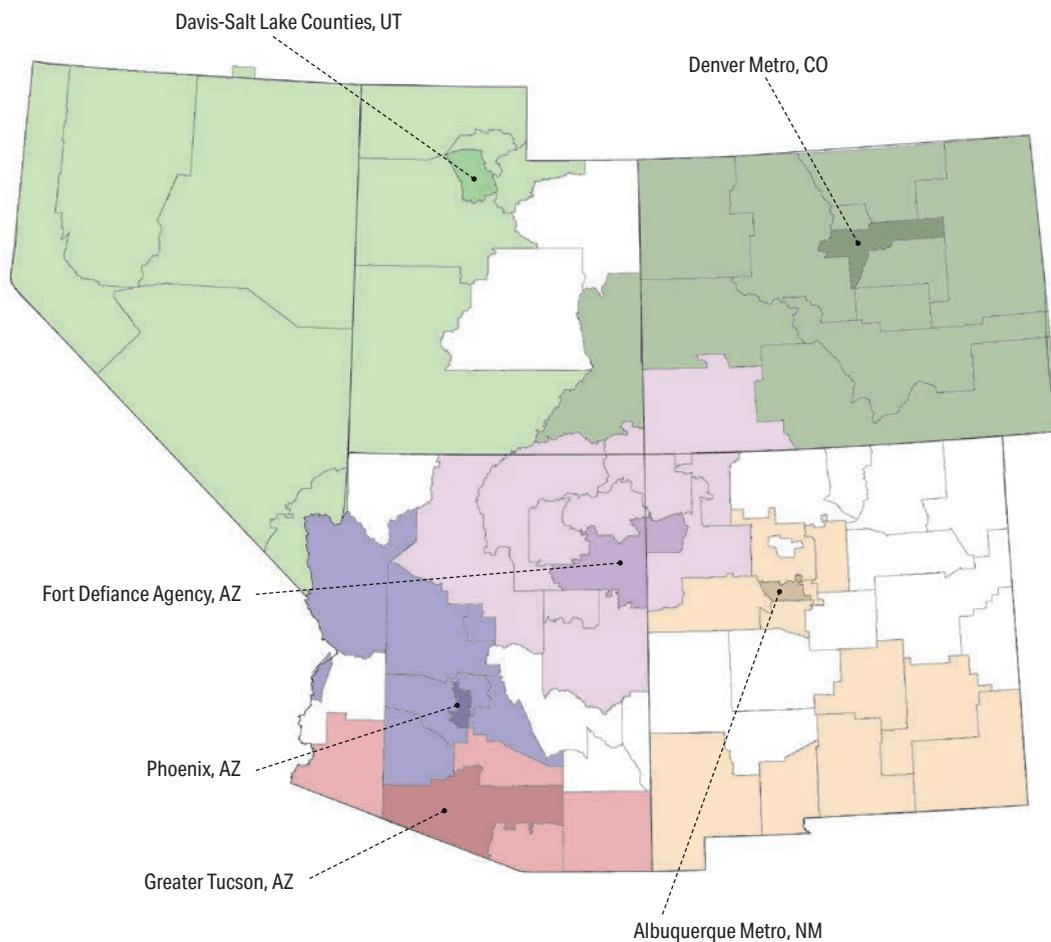
Clusters in the region advanced primarily through increased participation in devotional gatherings, expanding the nucleus of friends, and collaboration between institutions and agencies.

As the friends actively embraced the National Spiritual Assembly's call for every Bahá'í household to host a devotional, they realized how this seemingly simple activity has the power to transform the lives of families and entire

communities, and momentum started to build. In reservoir clusters, the number of devotionals and study circles began to multiply, enabling the Greater Tucson, Scottsdale, and Clark County West (Las Vegas) clusters to pass the third milestone on the continuum of growth. Including these three, eight clusters have achieved this goal and are focused not only on increasing their own efforts to build community but also on helping to enhance the same efforts in neighboring areas. Local Spiritual Assemblies, cluster agencies, and Auxiliary Board members in the reservoir clusters have been key to this effort as they collaborate with the friends.

The Regional Training Institute board and Regional Council, meanwhile, have worked closely with members of the Continental Board of Counselors and with Auxiliary Board members to strengthen the friends' understanding of the idea of an expanding nucleus.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



The number of nuclei in the region has almost doubled to over 175. As each of these groups of active friends contributes to loving service in their cluster and continues to add more participants, they work to enhance their process of action, reflection, and consultation. Furthermore, just as the reservoir clusters have worked together with adjoining areas, nuclei are encouraging neighboring nuclei to grow and expand.

Strength of institute training

As institute gatherings helped establish a pattern of learning around youth and junior youth, the Regional Training Institute board worked to systematically follow the effectiveness of tutors and the flow of learners involved in institute courses. This has improved the quality of Ruhi Book 8 and other higher-level study circles, and participants now more

readily translate what they learn into application in the field of teaching, nurturing relationships with families, and the pattern of training and accompanying.

The board also hosted a series of regional tutor gatherings with the goal of increasing understanding and fluency around the aim and purpose of the institute and supporting tutors to raise effectiveness in tutoring the courses and to meaningfully walk a path of service with others. A Ruhi Book 1 seminar engaged some 150 tutors, of whom more than 80 have formed Book 1 study circles.

Participation in core activities

In the Phoenix cluster, the collaboration of institutions and agencies expanded to include the entire community. This development ensured a unified vision for

The Regional Training Institute board worked to systematically follow the effectiveness of tutors and the flow of learners involved in institute courses. This has improved the quality of Ruhi Book 8 and other higher-level study circles, and participants now more readily translate what they learn into application in the field of teaching, nurturing relationships with families, and the pattern of training and accompanying.

The pandemic has aided the friends to think more about the families they know and to connect with them in meaningful ways. In some places, conversations with parents of junior youth are becoming more frequent and touching more on spiritual themes. Some parents of children, youth, and junior youth host regular family devotionals, and some parents have entered the main sequence of courses themselves.



growth across the cluster and a love for the process. As the community supports nearly 500 core activities, individuals continue to intensify their efforts to reach out to their friends and neighbors and share their love for the Faith.

Mobilization of youth

The Regional Training Institute has been paying attention to how friends are being drawn further into the life of society, particularly through relationships with families whose children participate in institute programs. The pandemic has aided the friends to think more about the families they know and to connect with them in meaningful ways. In some places, conversations with parents of junior youth are becoming more frequent and touching more on spiritual themes. Some parents of children, youth, and junior youth host regular family devotionals, and some parents have entered the main sequence of courses themselves.

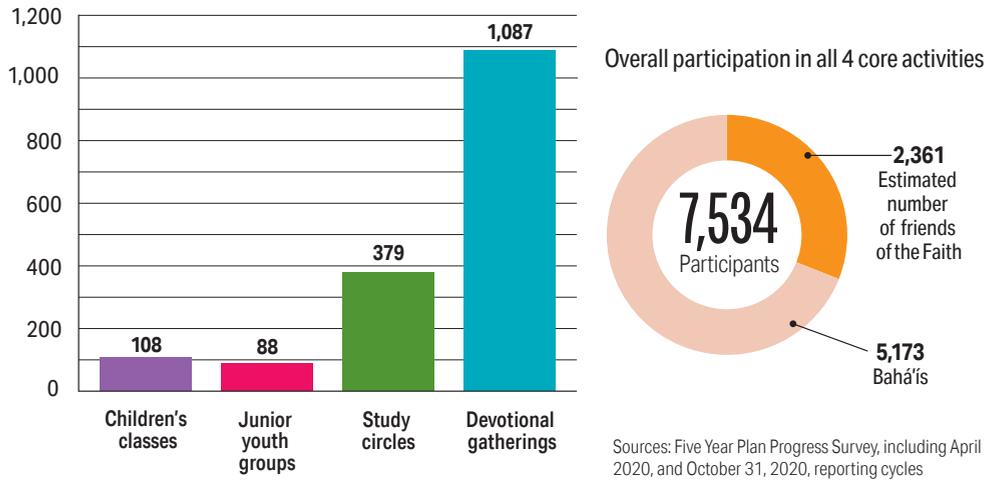
As parents have had to think about how to best support their own children's learning during the pandemic—which has, of course, forced many schools to hold classes online—they have also considered the education of children in their communities. In keeping with this, learning pods have emerged in various settings in the region; in these, parents

incorporate spiritual elements from both children's classes and the junior youth spiritual empowerment program and draw on the support of other parents in carrying out educational activities.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

Many communities saw an increase during 2020–21 in participation at Feasts and Holy Days. Hosting these and other meetings online not only enabled friends to connect with each other during lockdown, but allowed families with young children and homebound elderly to attend these gatherings. Devotions were enhanced by the contributions of children and families singing the sacred writings and sharing stories of the Faith. Families shared videos of their prayers with each other, and, in turn, these videos enhanced devotionals and study circles throughout the region.

1,662 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020

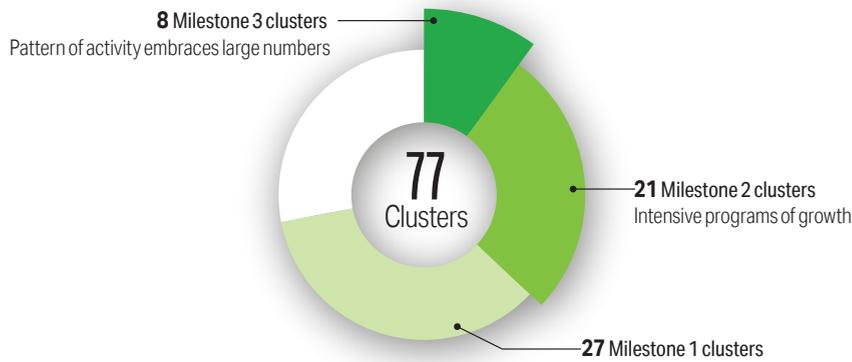


Homefront pioneers

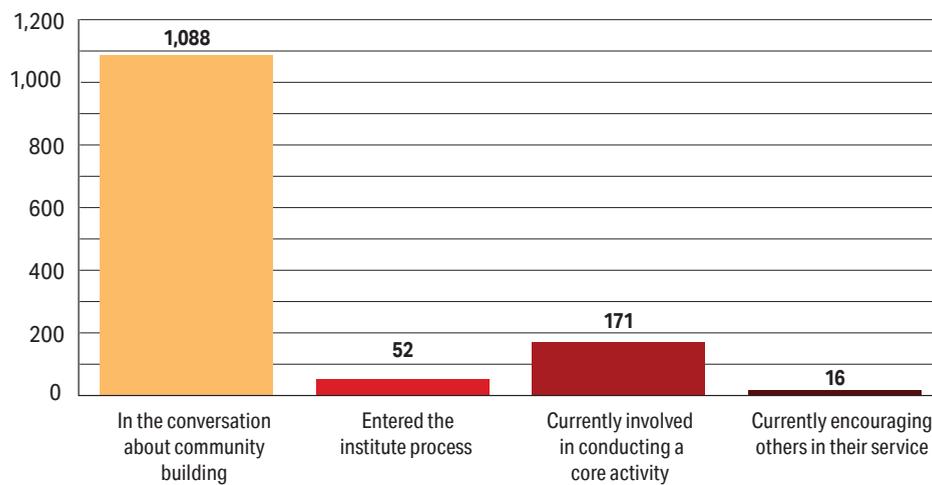
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



Five clusters could, in the coming year, advance past the third milestone and 13 could pass the second. The Chicago cluster, which passed the third milestone in 2019–20, has maintained and continues to strengthen its progress.

Advancements in programs of growth

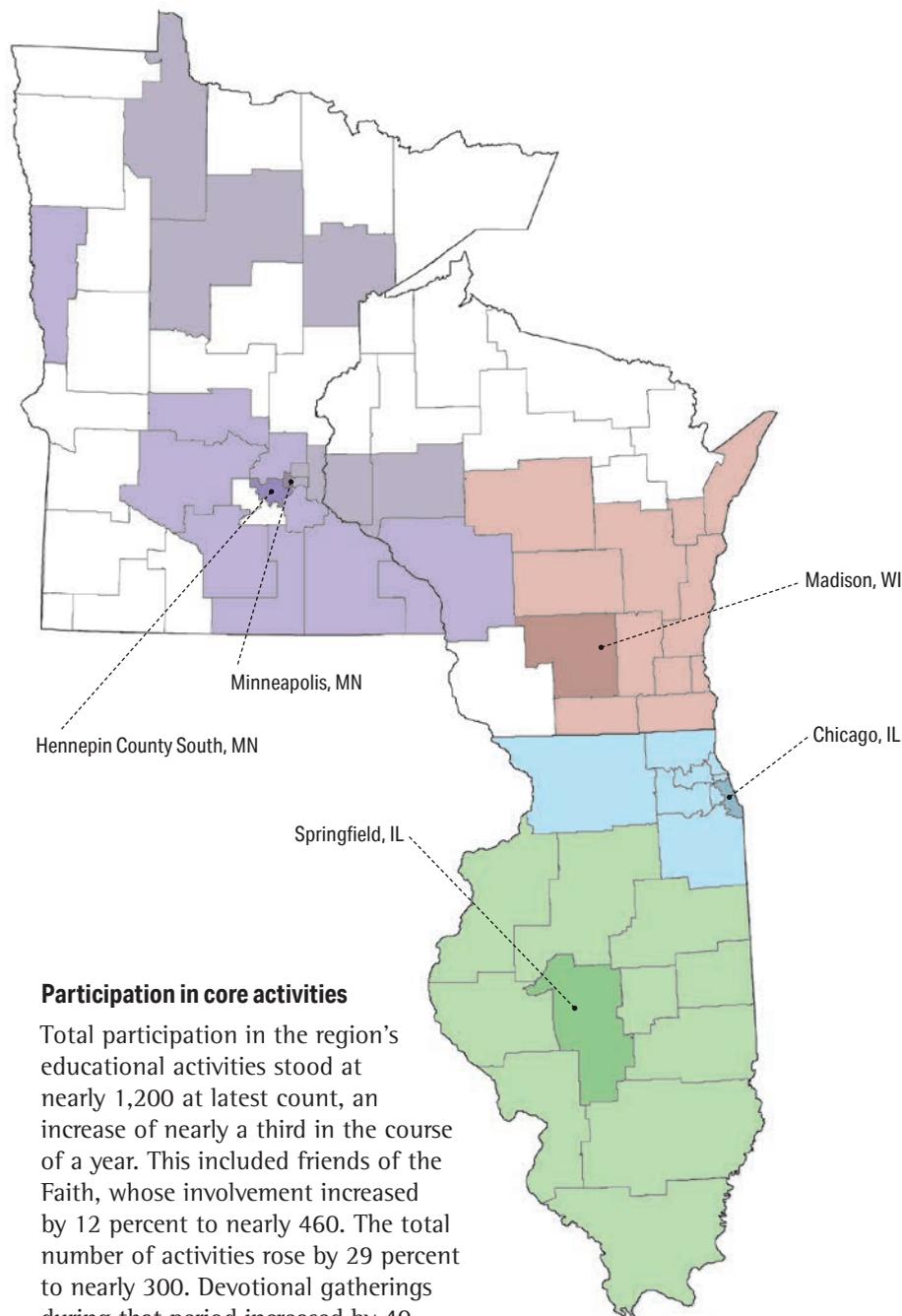
Joined by many friends of the Faith, the Regional Bahá'í Council of the Heartland States and believers across the region sharpened the clarity of their vision during 2020–21 and deepened their understanding of the goals and strategies that would advance programs of growth. While no clusters have attained a new milestone on the continuum of growth since last Riḍván, five could, in the coming year, advance past the third milestone and 13 could pass the second. The Chicago cluster, which passed the third milestone in 2019–20, has maintained and continues to strengthen its progress. The cluster has now set its sights on reaching more neighborhoods and populations as core activities continue to increase. Auxiliary Board members have facilitated teaching conferences and deployed an army of assistants to

accompany hundreds of friends who are taking the initiative at the grass roots.

Strength of institute training

The COVID-19 pandemic has both challenged and provided new opportunities to strengthen the institute process in the Heartland. The Regional Training Institute board, which was seated in 2019, expanded from three members to five over the past year, significantly increasing its capacity to guide and further develop the institute process. The board, along with a team of regional coordinators and the regional resource person, initiated several Ruhi Book 1 seminars and began systematically identifying clusters and subregions that need additional support. It also identified areas of learning that require greater attention. Notable among these is the need for the systematic development of children's class teachers and continuing efforts to raise the quality of tutoring.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Participation in core activities

Total participation in the region's educational activities stood at nearly 1,200 at latest count, an increase of nearly a third in the course of a year. This included friends of the Faith, whose involvement increased by 12 percent to nearly 460. The total number of activities rose by 29 percent to nearly 300. Devotional gatherings during that period increased by 40 percent to about 400, and continued to increase in the months since. While devotional gatherings and study circles accounted for most of the growth, the number and participation levels in junior youth groups and children's classes also rose substantially. These results reflect the growing strength of individual and institutional responses to current conditions.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

One new pioneer was invited to offer a year of service, joining a neighborhood team in an area of intense activity. (This pioneer settled after statistics were gathered for the chart that appears on [page 53](#).) Eleven of the 18 homefront pioneers who were deployed since 2018 remain at their posts and are actively serving.

While devotional gatherings and study circles accounted for most of the growth in core activities, the number and participation levels in junior youth groups and children's classes also rose substantially. These results reflect the growing strength of individual and institutional responses to current conditions.

The steady increase in the number of devotional gatherings, which are drawing ever more participants; increased efforts to support every member of the community; and creative approaches to addressing both spiritual and practical needs in response to the severe challenges of the current social environment indicate the Bahá'í community's rising consciousness and commitment to action.



Mobilization of youth

The Regional Training Institute board also sponsored a summer of service project engaging 50 youths from across the region, a virtual regional youth conference, and a virtual “winter of service camp,” which reached over 100 youths, junior youths, and children. As a result of the summer and winter activities and the regional youth conference, dozens of youths from across the region have been mobilized to offer service in their communities and to connect other young people to a path of service. Follow-up plans have been made to accompany these young people as they take action.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

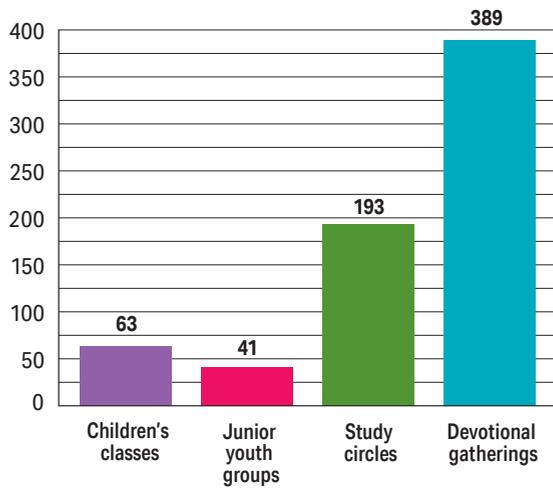
Frequent communication with Assemblies, Auxiliary Board members, and individuals throughout the region indicates that, in response to the challenges of the pandemic, the quality of Bahá'í community life has advanced noticeably. The steady increase in the number of devotional gatherings, which are drawing ever more participants; increased efforts to support every member of the community; and creative approaches to addressing both spiritual and practical needs in response to the severe challenges of the current social environment indicate the Bahá'í

community's rising consciousness and commitment to action. All Area Teaching Committees and a growing number of Spiritual Assemblies have adopted as a focus the support of efforts to expand the number of households holding regular devotional gatherings.

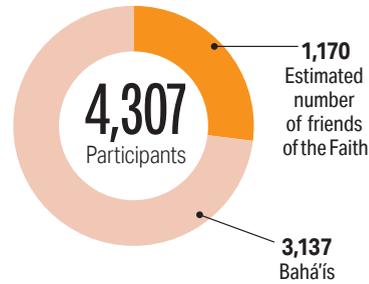
Additional comments

The capacity of the Regional Bahá'í Council and other regional and cluster agencies to identify and pursue objects of learning and foster the spiritual conditions that lead to growth is on the rise. The Statistical Reporting Program (SRP) is becoming an indispensable tool for analysis and planning, and more and more agencies are learning to systematically incorporate the program into their efforts. Another area of learning includes the emergence and support of Area Teaching Committees, which are strengthening their collaborations with the Auxiliary Boards, the Regional Training Institute board, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and subregional teams. Areas identified as needing more attention include facilitating flows of learning throughout the region, increasing the places where friends are engaged in intense activity, and engaging historically significant populations as protagonists in the community-building process.

686 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



Overall participation in all 4 core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

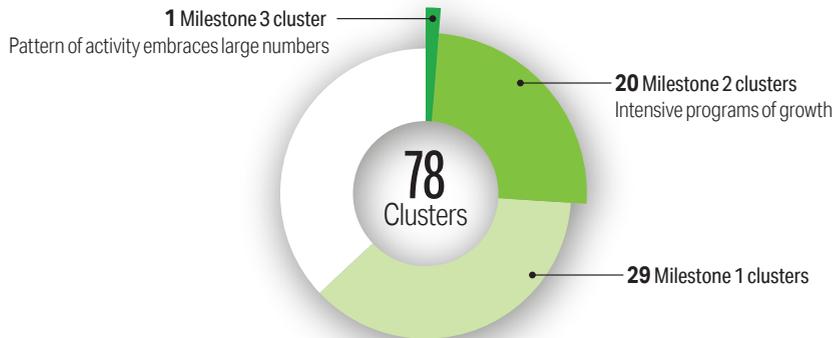
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

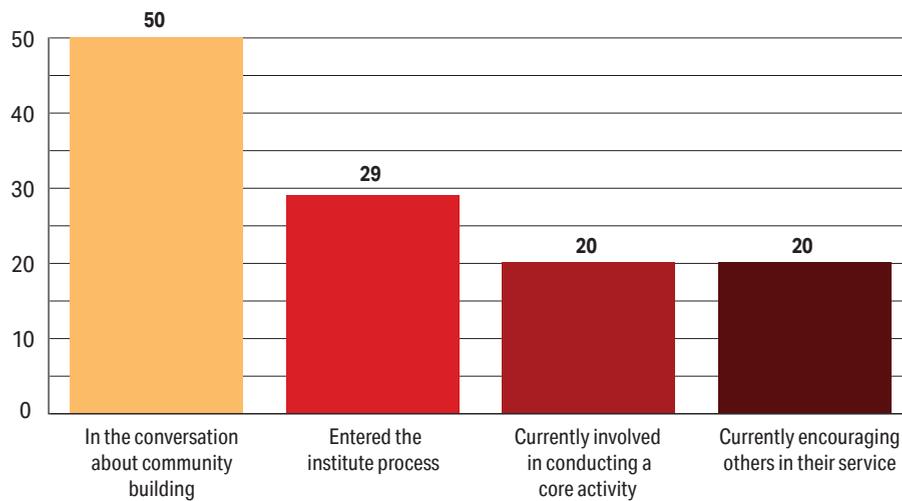
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Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



Soon after stay-at-home orders were made public, regional institute coordinators offered institute courses during a two-week virtual campaign. Nearly 150 friends from communities in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio came together in a laudable display of vitality. These dedicated souls studied the institute courses for hours every day, with some participating in multiple study circles.

The confluence of the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing awareness of racial injustice, and political divisions in our country provided unique opportunities for the advancement of the Faith in the Midwestern States in 2020–21. The Regional Training Institute, Area Teaching Committees, and Local Spiritual Assemblies collaborated with other regional institutions to meet the year's changing needs.

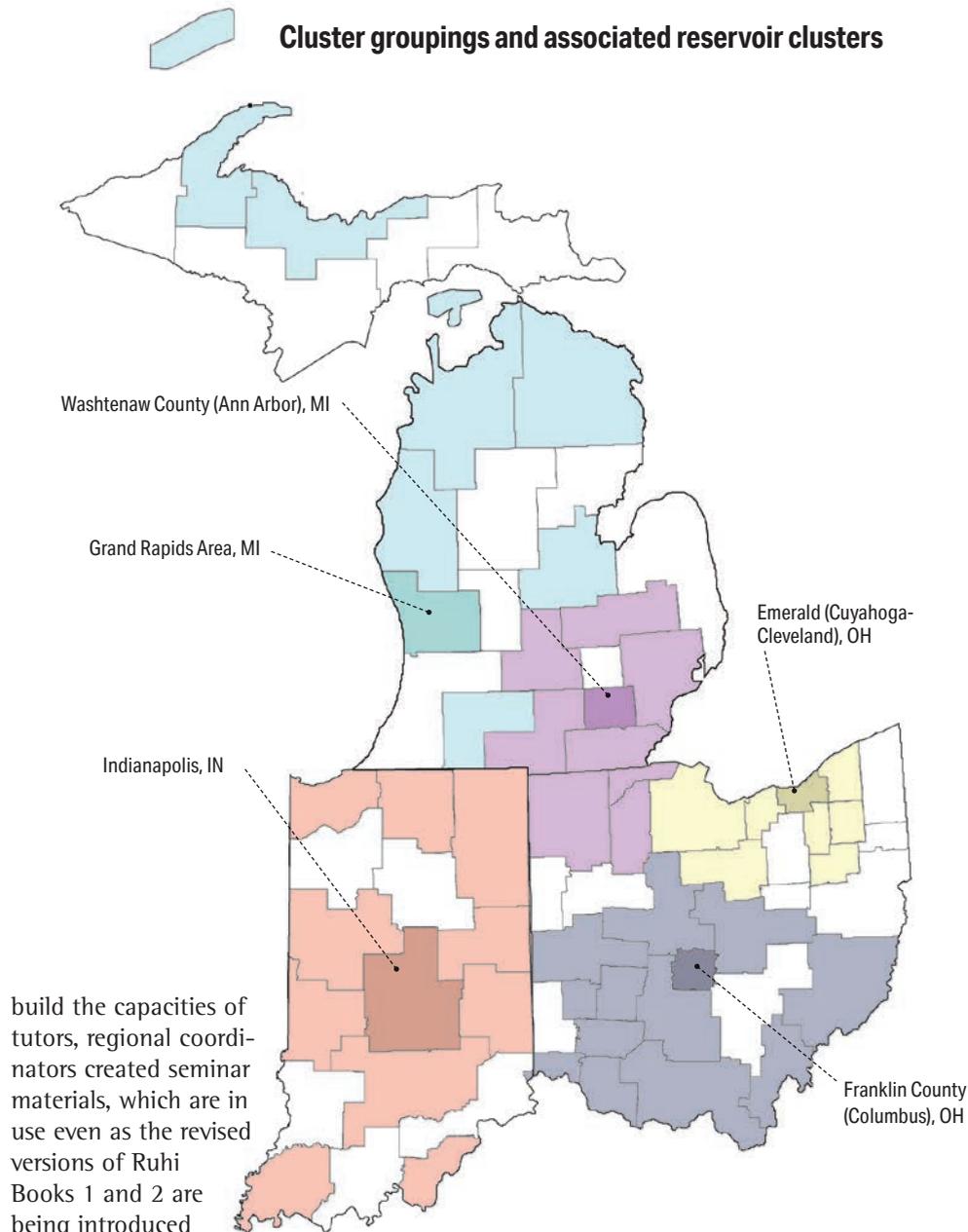
Advancements in programs of growth

The Council began the year with a vision of advancing at least 22 clusters to the second milestone on the continuum of growth, and moving all five reservoir clusters to the third milestone. While the pandemic forced the Council to adapt its plans, persistent and creative efforts led to steady progress in 15 clusters. Three additional clusters are set to follow the Franklin County (Columbus), Ohio, cluster in advancing past the third

milestone. Four clusters show promise of reaching the second milestone by Rīḡvān 2021, with another seven to nine expected to follow suit by Rīḡvān 2022. Subregional teams and mechanisms for building the capacities of Assemblies, Area Teaching Committees, and expanding nuclei of friends continue to propel growth forward.

Strength of institute training

Institute coordinators responded to the pandemic by increasing institute activity. Soon after stay-at-home orders were made public, regional institute coordinators offered institute courses during a two-week virtual campaign. Nearly 150 friends from communities in Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio came together in a laudable display of vitality. These dedicated souls studied the institute courses for hours every day, with some participating in multiple study circles. Collectively, the friends studied Ruhi Books 1–2, 3 (grade 2), 4–11, and 13. To



build the capacities of tutors, regional coordinators created seminar materials, which are in use even as the revised versions of Ruhi Books 1 and 2 are being introduced in the region. An expanding network of tutors at the grass roots led to the establishment of the region's first Regional Training Institute board in November 2020.

Participation in core activities

To both maintain and build community activities, the Council provided Zoom accounts for institutions and agencies that needed them. Since April 2020 there have been nearly 5,000 Zoom meetings of all kinds, including all four core activities, large teaching conferences, and small "home visits," with an average of six people per meeting. Teleconferencing capacities have complemented the

Council's website (midwestbahai.org) as a communication resource for the region.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

Rather than attempt to enlist new pioneers during the pandemic, volunteers contacted the more than 50 pioneers already in the field to learn about their plans and offer them support through the Institute. To help build capacity, a cadre of experienced tutors offered a full range of courses on Zoom. Pioneers are now being contacted again to discover what additional training or support they need to effectively build core activities.

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Throughout the year, work with youth continued, such as by meeting outdoors with masks and practicing social distancing. As the weather cooled, teams met in heated garages, large tents, and around firepits, employing heated stadium seats and blankets to keep warm. Since large numbers could not gather, they focused on building capacity among smaller groups of youth.



Mobilization of youth

Progress both in attracting young people to engage in institute training and in accompanying them into service continued in most neighborhoods, though at a slower pace. To regain momentum, the Regional Training Institute invited youth to a virtual conference focusing on racial justice, attracting more than 190 individuals. This was followed by a summer youth intensive.

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Quality of community life and its devotional character

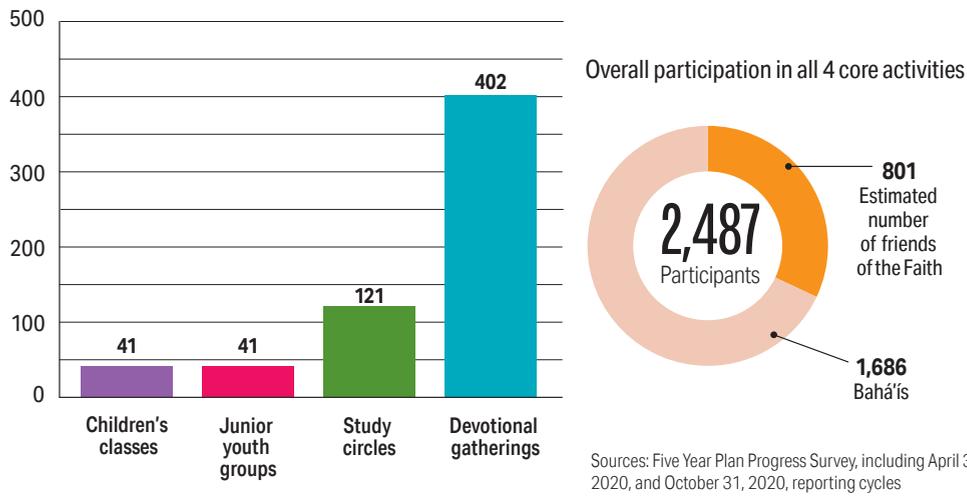
To launch the concluding year of the Five Year Plan, the Council had

envisioned a region-wide visit to the House of Worship in April. When the pandemic hit, the visit was transformed into a virtual devotional program attended by at least 450 people. The gathering inspired feelings of consecration and unity and demonstrated the utility and beauty of virtual devotional gatherings. The Council continues to support the growth of devotional gatherings through work with Area Teaching Committees, newsletter articles, special mailings, and resource pages on its website (midwestbahai.org/resources-for-devotions/).

Racial justice and unity

In September 2020, the Council created the Racial Justice and Unity Forum to provide occasions for people to share what they are doing and learning in this area within the framework of the Five Year Plan. Average attendance has been 125 participants per session, with a total of more than 300 thus far. The Council hopes that by conducting its work in a learning mode, the Forum will lead to both a greater understanding of this vitally important issue, and an ever-increasing effectiveness in eradicating all forms of prejudice within and outside of the Bahá'í community.

605 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



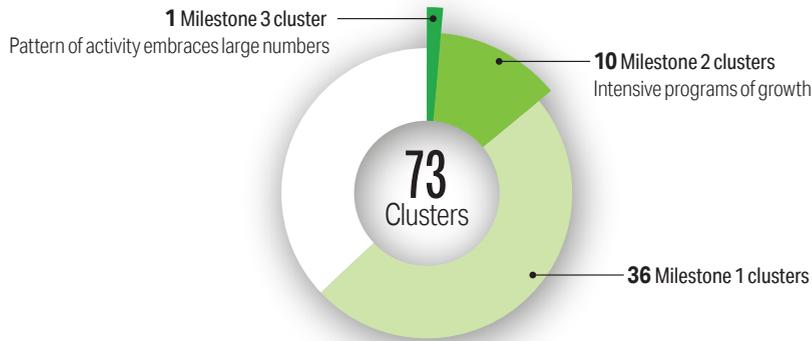
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

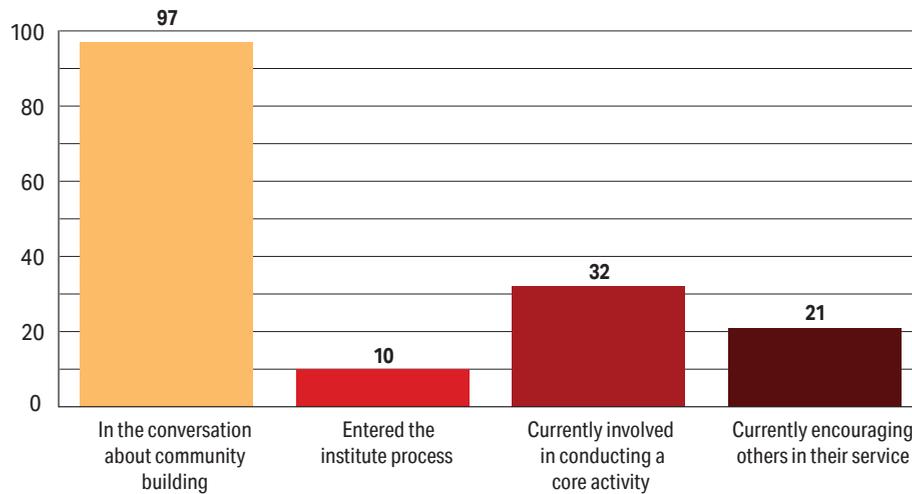
6



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



The Council acknowledged with delight during the year that another five clusters passed the third milestone of growth, bringing the total in the region at this writing to 10, with others rapidly advancing.

Benefiting from the tremendous resilience and dedication shown by the friends during 2020–21—a year characterized by challenges both unprecedented and formidable—the Northeastern States experienced significant progress in advancing the objectives of the Five Year Plan.

Advancements in programs of growth

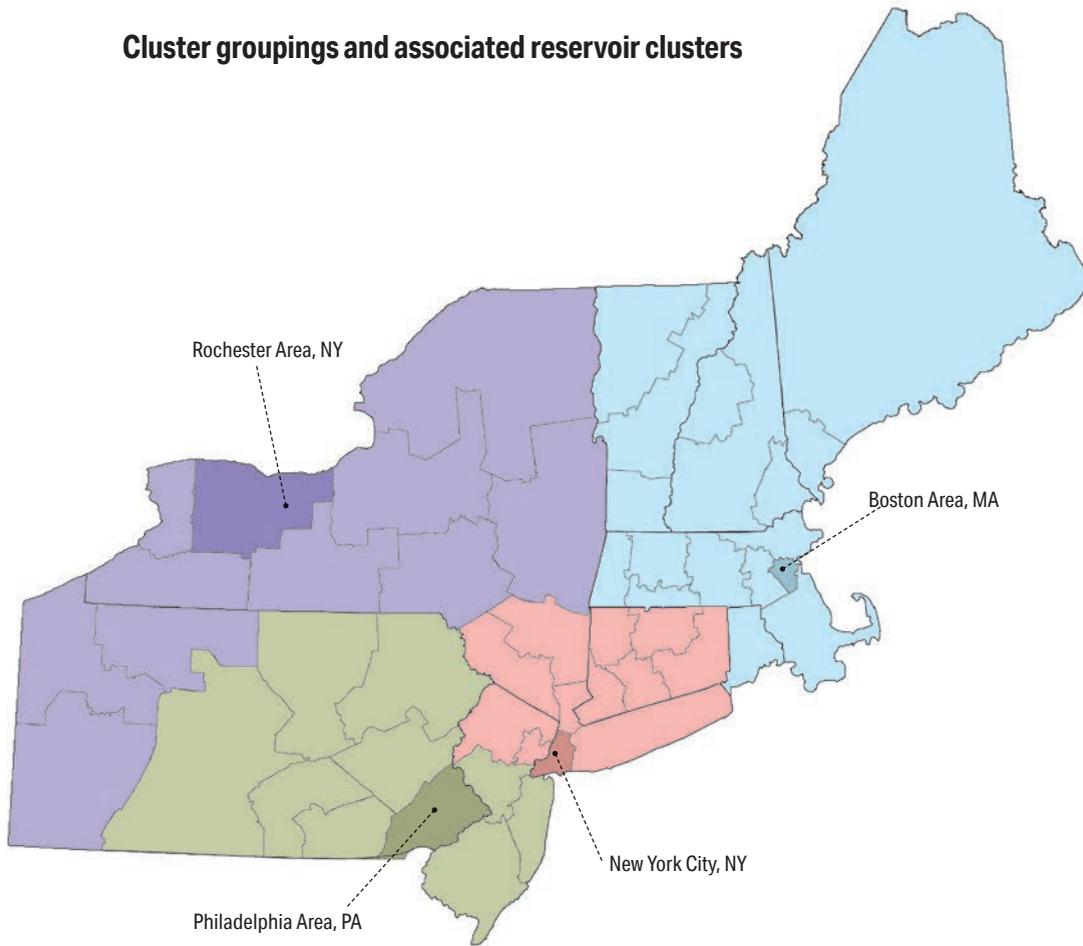
During the year, the 47 clusters in the region continued to advance along the continuum of growth described by the Universal House of Justice. An additional five clusters slated to move from the first milestone of growth to the second accomplished their goal, with only three now remaining from the 13 that held that same goal at the Plan's outset. Strategies to advance those three are in place thanks to the tireless efforts of the region's Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, the accompaniment of Regional Council members and others, and the devoted efforts of the friends. Further, the Council acknowledged with

delight during the year that another five clusters passed the third milestone of growth, bringing the total in the region at this writing to 10, with others rapidly advancing.

Strength of institute training

The region saw advances in the strength of institute training during the past year, despite restrictions imposed by the pandemic. Ruhi Book 1 seminars were well-attended and continue to engage increasing numbers in institute training, as generations of tutors invite the participation of those in their neighborhoods or networks. A virtual study circle campaign began in the summer and involved study of every book in the sequence of courses, igniting interest in participation in the courses that continued beyond the campaign. Building capacity for coordination at all levels is resulting in increased attention to the quality of the institute process throughout the region, contributing to greater participation.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Participation in core activities

Based on the success of the Devotional Gathering Campaign launched in 2019, the Council decided to launch another, this time with the goal of achieving 999 new devotionals across the region by Rīḍvān 2021. With some 800 new devotionals now being regularly held as this is written, the Council is anticipating another success. If the goal is reached, it will mean the number of devotional gatherings in the region was doubled in the span of a single year! Not only is this significant in itself, it is important to the region's increasing ability to learn about inviting more and more friends from the larger community to participate

in these occasions and to progress from them to engagement in the institute process and, perhaps, a path of service. Participation in other core activities—for example, children's classes and junior youth groups—has been more challenging this year, but the friends arose with creativity and shared learning to find ways to continue those activities and begin new ones.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

About 35 individuals are currently serving as homefront pioneers in clusters and neighborhoods across the region. Some were placed during 2020–21, even while efforts to recruit new homefront

If the goal of the new Devotional Gathering Campaign is reached, it will mean the number of devotional gatherings in the region was doubled in the span of a single year! Not only is this significant in itself, it is important to the region's increasing ability to learn about inviting more and more friends from the larger community to participate in these occasions and to progress from them to engagement in the institute process, and, perhaps, a path of service.

The Council has noticed an increase in unity and love throughout the region, evident in the devotional spirit permeating homes and community gathering places and nurturing growing bonds of friendship between those connected through activities that direct their hearts to Bahá'u'lláh. We see it in an enhanced dependence on the Word of God manifest in study circles or in the voices of children and junior youth as they share it with each other and their families.



pioneers or deploy teams of mobile tutors have been unusually challenging owing to pandemic-related restrictions. It is immensely gratifying to note that homefront pioneers, particularly those serving in neighborhoods experiencing intense activity, have been able to contribute to further growth while maintaining safety standards for all involved.

Mobilization of youth

Both engaging youths from neighborhood settings in training in the sequence of courses and accompanying them into service continue to be central focuses of the Regional Training Institute. Despite the limitations imposed by COVID-19, the process is advancing, and much is being learned about inviting the involvement of young people in the work and mobilizing them as protagonists in community-building processes. Some are being enrolled as Bahá'ís as they continue involvement in helping to build a better world.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

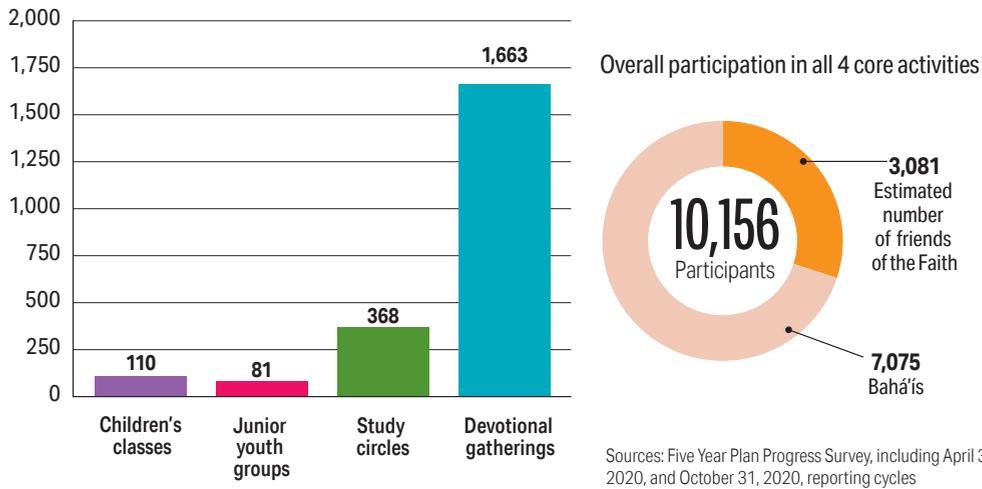
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Additional comments

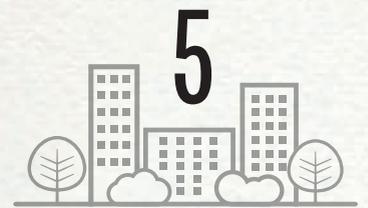
Additional efforts—such as the study of grassroots materials in clusters and the study by Local Spiritual Assemblies of the Universal House of Justice's July 22 letter on race unity—have been instrumental in furthering understanding about the Five Year Plans' framework for action and building coherence with efforts to address the most pressing issues of our time. Indeed, the region's response to the study of guidance on and engagement in meaningful conversations, particularly about race unity, has been an area of significant advance in the region this year.

2,222 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020

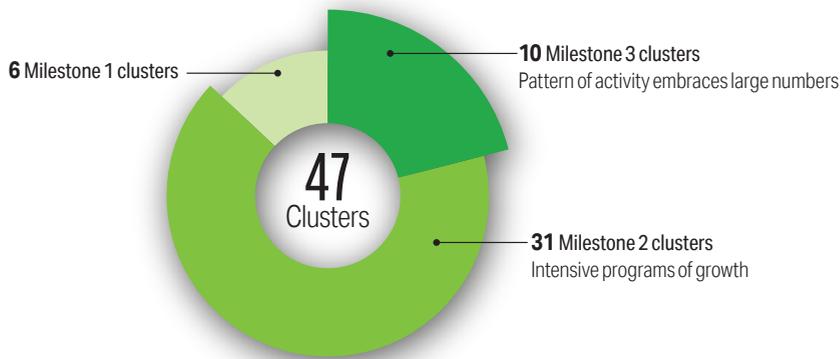


Homefront pioneers

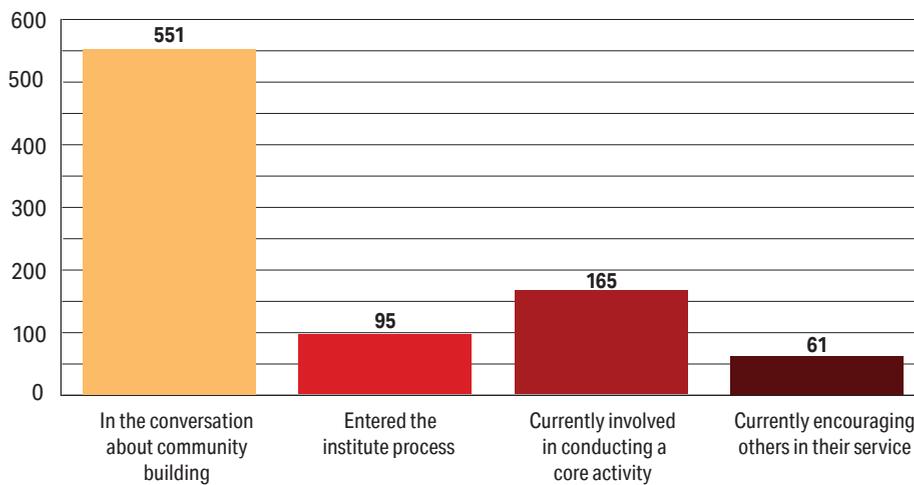
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



Two of the newer emerging clusters are poised to reach the first milestone of growth by Riḍván this year, including the remote Bonner/Boundary cluster in Idaho, where the efforts of one person have led to growth following tutor enhancement training. Two other clusters at the first milestone are slated to advance to the second by this Riḍván.

The Northern Plains region experienced a surge in activity during 2020–21. Creativity as well as an expanded use of technology resulting from restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic allowed more friends to become engaged in meeting the goals of the Five Year Plan through a variety of opportunities and channels.

Advancements in programs of growth

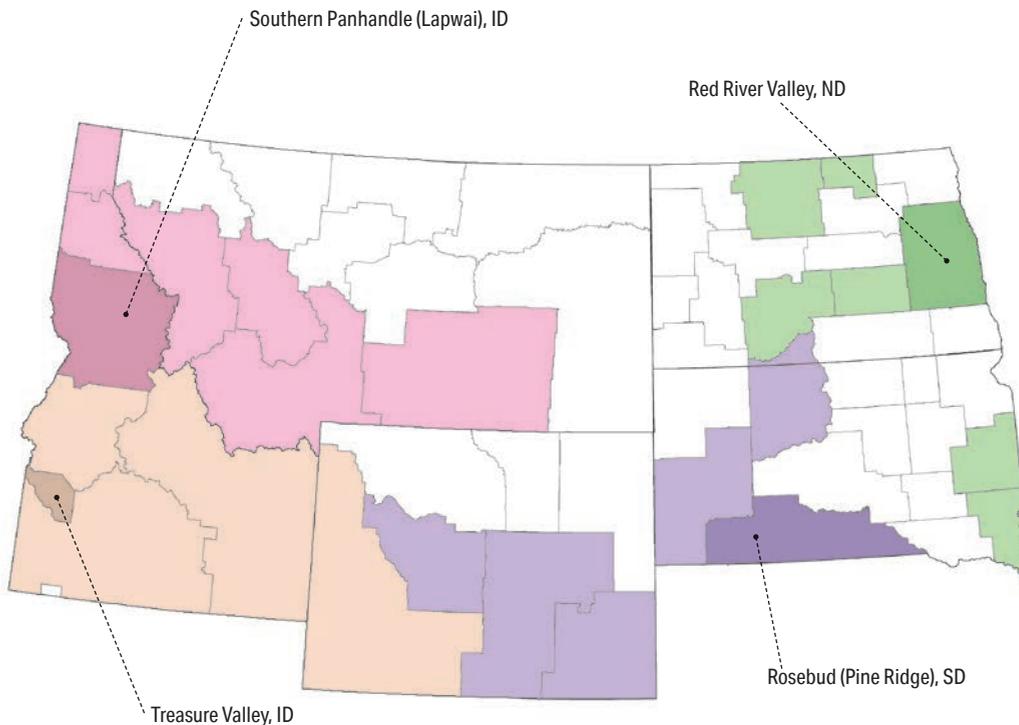
The clusters in this vast and sparsely populated region are making slow but steady progress. Although none passed milestones along the continuum of growth between last Riḍván and February, more have been identified as having the potential to advance than existed at the beginning of the current Five Year Plan. Two of the newer emerging clusters are poised to reach the first milestone of growth by Riḍván this year, including the remote Bonner/Boundary cluster in Idaho, where the efforts of one person have led to growth following

tutor enhancement training. Two other clusters at the first milestone are slated to advance to the second by this Riḍván. The Treasure Valley cluster surrounding Boise has also made substantial gains and is striving to reach the third milestone by Riḍván 2022.

Strength of institute training

The institute process gained strength following the new Regional Training Institute (RTI) board's inauguration. In coordination with the Four Corners region, several people have participated in tutor enhancement training for the revised Ruhi Books 1 and 2. The expansion of this endeavor has created a second wave of trained Book 1 tutors. The untiring work of both the regional institute resource person and the regional institute coordinator has resulted in increased learning throughout the region. There is an increased focus on the areas of learning that surround the flow of youth through the institute process

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



and the establishment of a basic junior youth program. Further, technology has enabled the participation in study circles of many who were previously unable to do so in person owing to their distance from the venue or a lack of material resources and local tutors.

Participation in core activities

Community activities have increased as a result of greater participation in study circles. A third of the people who completed Ruhi Book 1 during this Five Year Plan did so this year. Some facilitators are using Book 1 and other individuals are using devotional gatherings to address the issue of racial justice. Grassroots teaching materials, including the concentric circle activity shared widely among the friends, helped people to refocus on opportunities to engage with others. There are more than twice

as many friends of the Faith in study circles than there were at the beginning of the year. Meanwhile, due to social distancing efforts aimed at mitigating the pandemic, junior youth groups and children's classes did not show similar growth.

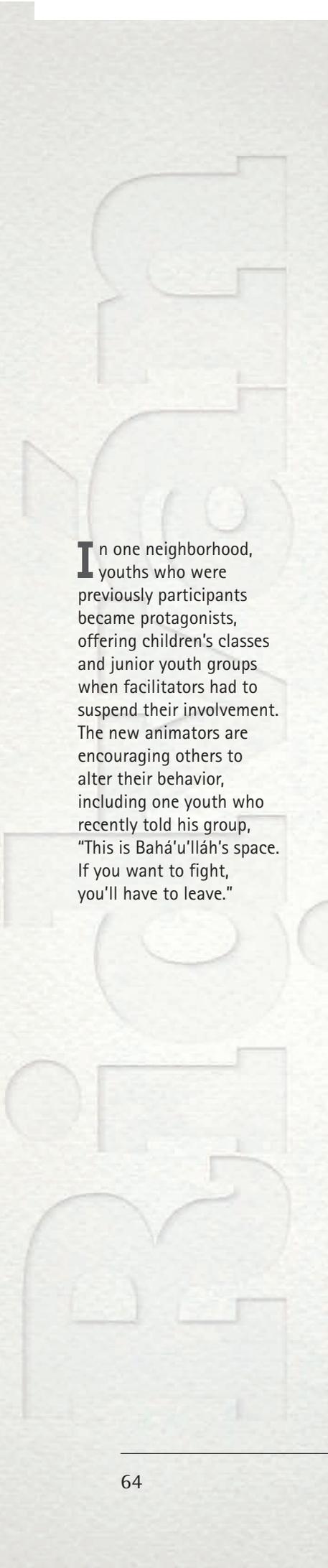
Deployment of homefront pioneers

Although no new homefront pioneers settled in the region this year, those who came in previous years are at the forefront of community-building activities.

Mobilization of youth

The mobilization of youth has been negatively affected by the pandemic. Earlier plans for youth summers of service as well as youth gatherings and junior youth camps had to be postponed. Anticipating the eventual resumption of in-person gatherings, many youths are

Technology has enabled the participation in study circles of many who were previously unable to do so in person owing to their distance from the venue or a lack of material resources and local tutors.



In one neighborhood, youths who were previously participants became protagonists, offering children's classes and junior youth groups when facilitators had to suspend their involvement. The new animators are encouraging others to alter their behavior, including one youth who recently told his group, "This is Bahá'u'lláh's space. If you want to fight, you'll have to leave."



developing skills to invite friends into local junior youth groups and youth-focused study circles. On the other hand, the pandemic has given animators and teachers opportunities to engage more with parents during one-on-one "porch visits." In one neighborhood, youths who were previously participants became protagonists, offering children's classes and junior youth groups when facilitators had to suspend their involvement. The new animators are encouraging others to alter their behavior, including one youth who recently told his group, "This is Bahá'u'lláh's space. If you want to fight, you'll have to leave." Efforts have also been made to connect isolated youth and junior youth throughout the region through virtual groups.

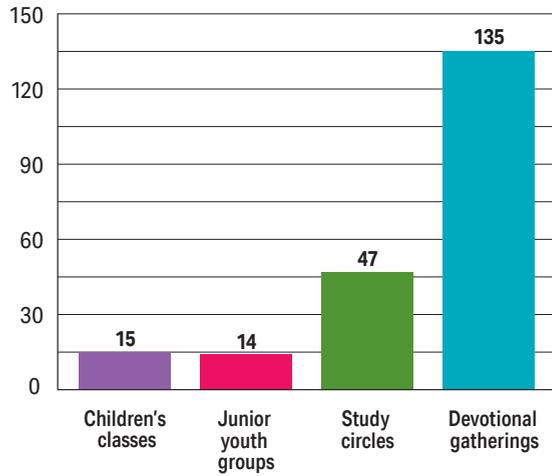
Quality of community life and its devotional character

Collaboration with other agencies and institutions has enriched activities in the region. Council members facilitated the study of the Office of Community Administration's deepening materials

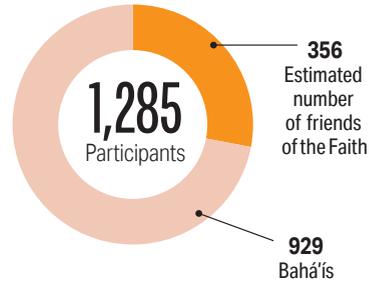
with most of the region's Spiritual Assemblies, which strengthened several Assemblies' support of community-building activities. Use of the online Statistical Report Program (SRP) has assisted both the RTI board and the Council with planning and assessing growth, and the region's only Area Teaching Committee has begun using SRP for planning. Meanwhile, materials developed by the Office of Education and Schools were piloted in a neighborhood by a Council member and others in the community.

Although restrictions on gatherings created by the pandemic could have resulted in stagnation, the Council and the friends in the region embraced opportunities that were created, actually strengthening both the institute process and the spiritual qualities manifest in the region's far-flung communities. The friends look forward to the coming year with expectations of further advancement using their newfound skills.

211 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



Overall participation in all 4 core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

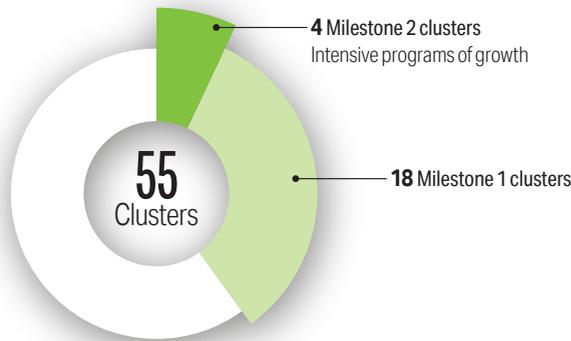
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

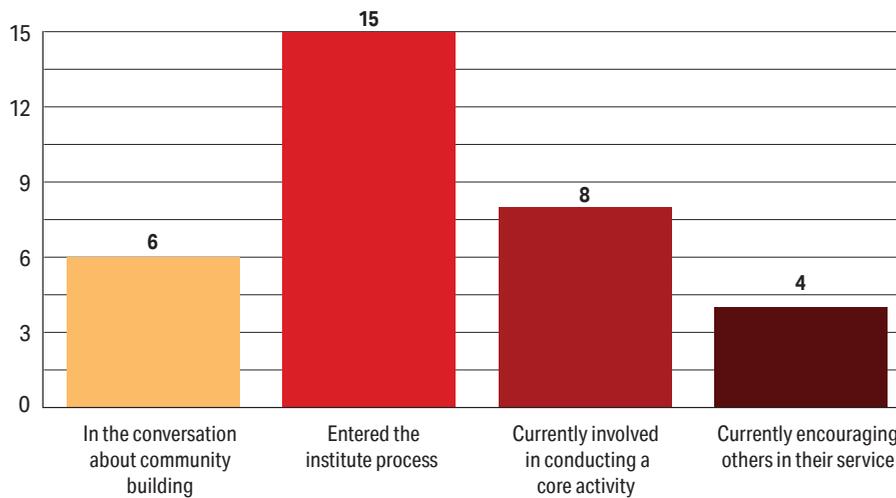
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Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



Regional Bahá'í Council of the Northwestern States



Strategies contributing to the advancement of clusters include weekly visits by experienced youths from reservoir clusters, a strengthening of the focus of homefront pioneers, and an increased growth in the capacity of cluster agencies to collaborate with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

In this concluding year of the Five Year Plan, the Northwestern States recorded remarkable progress despite the pandemic. A significant development was the Regional Council's decision to embark on a deep study of available guidance to better understand its institutional responsibility for making freedom from racial prejudice "the watchword of the entire Bahá'í community." The Council hopes to learn through a systematic process of action and reflection about its role as a protagonist in addressing racial justice and in fostering the development of truly welcoming communities within the framework of the Five Year Plan.

Advancements in programs of growth

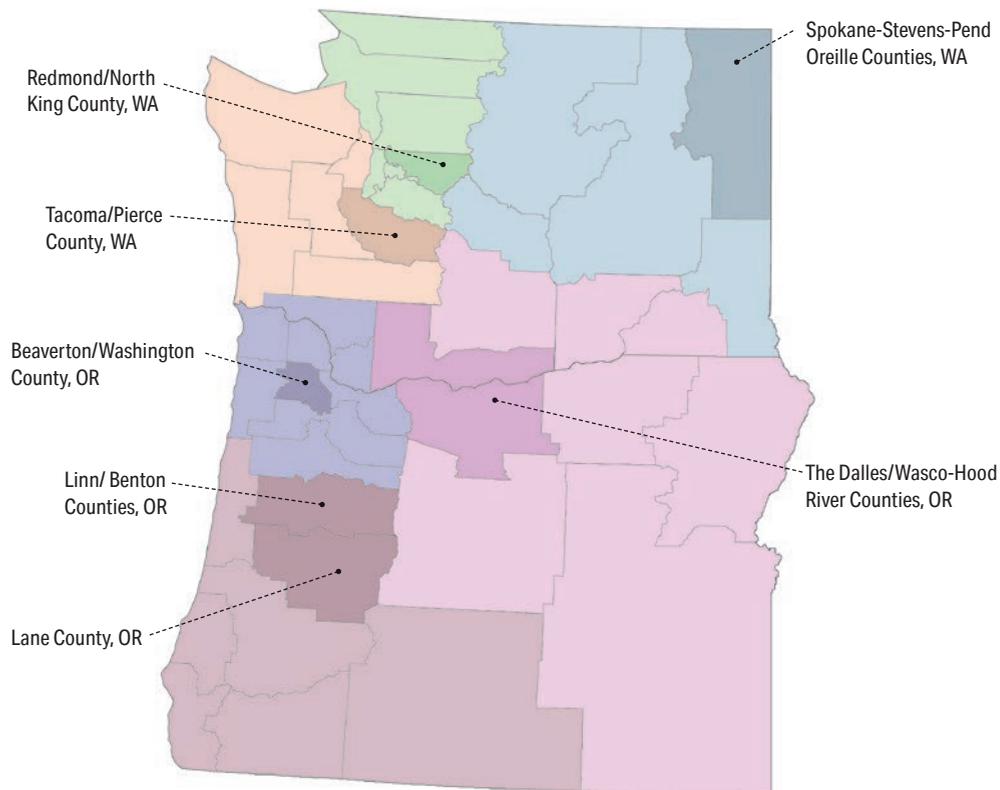
During 2020–21, at least three clusters in the region advanced past the second milestone on the continuum of growth and five advanced past the third. By *Riḍván*, nearly half of the region's 43 clusters are expected to have passed a

new milestone since the Plan's inception. Strategies contributing to these advancements include weekly visits by experienced youths from reservoir clusters, a strengthening of the focus of homefront pioneers, and an increased growth in the capacity of cluster agencies to collaborate with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

Strength of institute training

Over the course of the year, the Regional Training Institute fostered the movement of youth along a path of service, focused on raising the junior youth spiritual empowerment program to a basic level in every reservoir cluster, and worked with families to support the spiritual education of children. It also raised capacity in the region to tutor the revised *Ruhi Book 1*, giving special attention to tutors serving clusters at the first milestone. Steady learning to facilitate the study of *Books 8 and 9* has strengthened spiritual health, and

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



cohorts are moving sequentially through the second cycle of institute courses. In the pandemic's early months, the friends used seminars and phone calls to share experiences and consult on safety guidelines, and study circle participation rose by more than half as activities were transferred to online platforms.

Participation in core activities

Despite restrictions related to the pandemic, the number of core activities increased by more than 40 percent this year. In all, core activities and participation rose in 34 clusters, with numbers more than doubling in 10 clusters and tripling in one other. Aided by the ease of Zoom gatherings, the numbers of study circles and their participants alike soared by about 40 percent over last year. Since the inception of the Plan, the number of study circles rose by close to 80 percent, and the number of friends of the Faith participating nearly doubled. While the curtailment of in-person gatherings prevented similar

growth in the numbers of junior youth groups and children's classes, the friends employed creative ways to both sustain and initiate programs.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

Homefront pioneers have been vital to progress in the 24 clusters where they reside. Eighty youth and adult pioneers across the region—accompanied by Auxiliary Board members, grouping team members, Council members, and the Youth Service Program coordinator—benefit from monthly reflection occasions to study, learn, and share. Among the pioneers, 31 serve in seven neighborhoods of intense activity.

Mobilization of youth

Across the Northwest, some 175 youths serve as children's class teachers, animators, and tutors, including four who serve full-time. Advanced clusters continue to learn about mobilizing young people from the larger community, and "Strengthening the Institute" gatherings

In all, core activities and participation rose in 34 clusters, with numbers more than doubling in 10 clusters and tripling in one other. Aided by the ease of Zoom gatherings, the numbers of study circles and their participants alike soared by about 40 percent over last year.

The Council initiated a regional conversation with friends of African descent, who requested assistance helping Local Spiritual Assemblies overcome racism in their communities. To learn to accompany Spiritual Assemblies in their learning, the Council enrolled in the Wilmette Institute's Anti-Black Racism course, and invited selected Assemblies to join them, along with members of the Auxiliary Boards and Regional Training Institute board.



and related learning processes make it possible to share experience and insights across the region. As a result, three clusters with centers of intense activity and two focusing on neighborhoods have activities numbering from 17 to 60. Overall, the region's experience has highlighted the importance of a systematic learning process, true friendship, and consultation in accompanying youth into service.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

The number of devotional gatherings grew by over 50 percent last year, fueled by a focus on strengthening the devotional spirit in communities. Devotionals have increased 420 percent since the Plan's beginning, with general attendance and the attendance of friends of the Faith nearly doubling to surpass 4,500 and 1,000, respectively, in that time.

Racial justice and unity

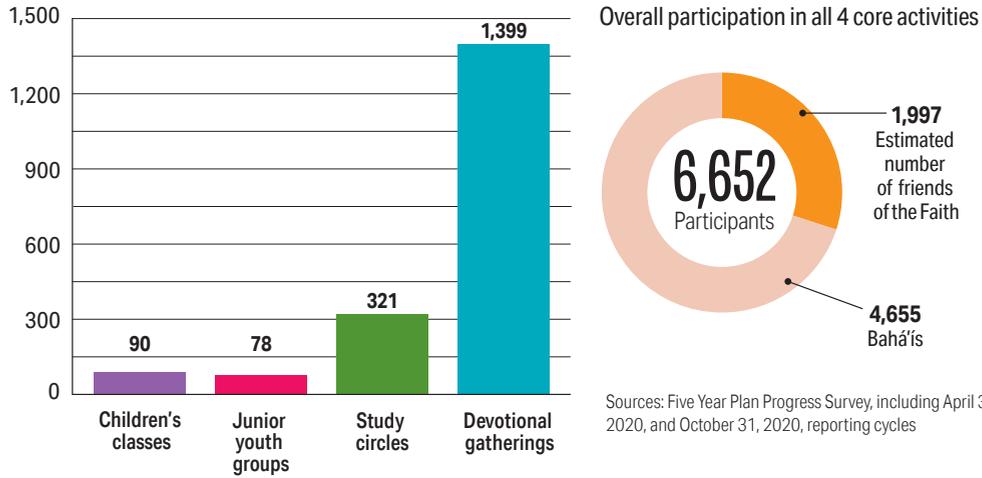
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Additional comments

Eight social media outreach teams drew 850 souls into meaningful conversation spaces, with about a third returning regularly. Since the outset of this program, eight friends have enrolled in the Faith, 109 attend firesides or deepenings, and nearly 200 participate in core activities. The efforts of one team contributed to the advancement of their rural cluster past the second milestone, garnering learning to be used in similar environments. Of special note, media outreach efforts attract a wide diversity of participants.

1,888 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020

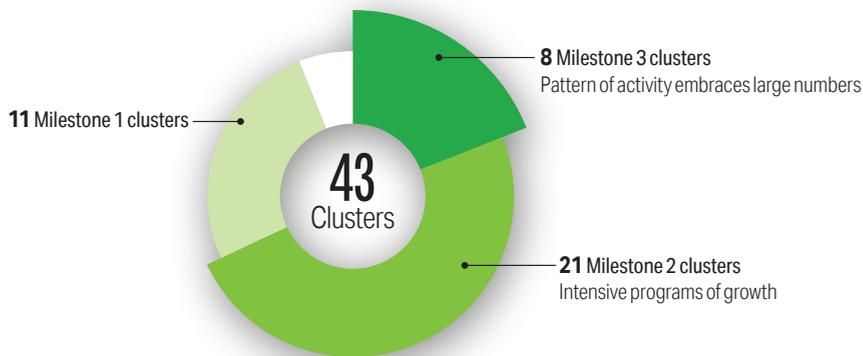


Homefront pioneers

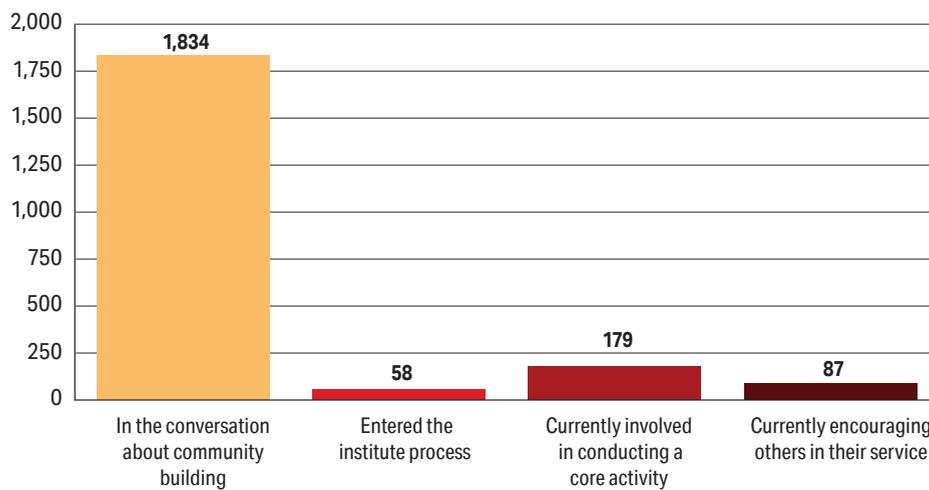
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



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



In preparation for the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the yearlong “Will of the Master” institute initiative was launched, working toward universal completion of Ruhi Book 8 and continuation to Book 9 as a means of deepening personal connections with the Covenant.

Advancements in programs of growth

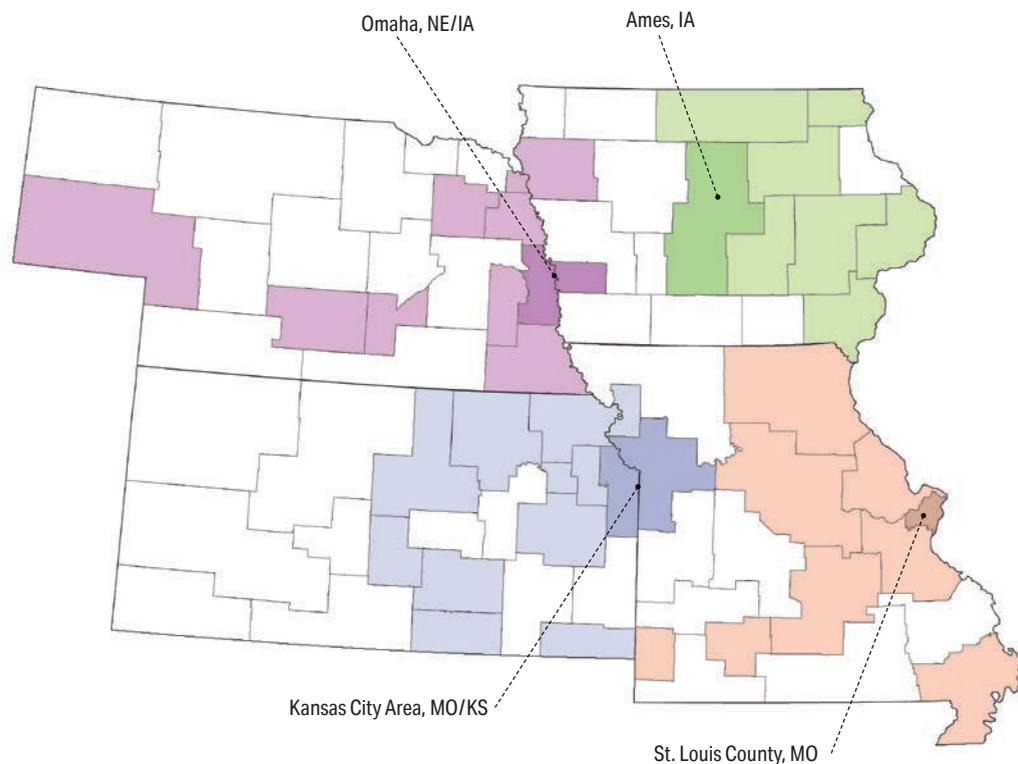
Developments in the Prairie States region during the year 2020–21 saw the Manhattan, Kansas, cluster reach the second milestone on the continuum of growth, with another cluster set to follow by Riqván. Several additional clusters are making clear advances toward the third milestone, including Springfield, Missouri, which moved from 18 to 32 core activities, and Ames/Des Moines, Iowa, which grew from 19 to 44. The ability of Area Teaching Committees to systematically convene gatherings between cluster institute coordinators, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and Auxiliary Board members helped build unity of vision in reservoir clusters, including Omaha, Nebraska, and Kansas City Area, Missouri/Kansas.

Strength of institute training

A growing number of individuals benefited from a review of the revised Book 1 of the Ruhi Institute. These Tutor Effectiveness Trainings focused not only on deepening understanding of the course’s concepts but also on increasing the capacity to explore those concepts in conversation and to effectively invite others to engage in institute training.

In preparation for the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the yearlong “Will of the Master” institute initiative was launched, working toward universal completion of Ruhi Book 8 and continuation to Book 9 as a means of deepening personal connections with the Covenant. Thus far, 269 individuals are studying or have completed Books 8 and 9. The Regional Training Institute board is also following up on the National

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Spiritual Assembly's invitation to study Book 11, *Material Means*.

Participation in core activities

Despite limitations imposed by the pandemic, the number of core activities grew by more than a quarter over the past year. This was largely driven by increases in devotional gatherings and higher-level study circles. Children's classes and junior youth groups have been more challenging to sustain, but support is provided through regional quarterly gatherings for children's class teachers. Also, animator reflection gatherings in the Kansas City cluster are being opened to friends across the region.

The movement of many activities to online platforms posed challenges, but also allowed for increased participation

by rural and isolated friends. Many communities have seen notable increases in attendance at Feasts, devotional gatherings, and study circles. The online environment also empowered many to begin holding activities of their own. The Sioux City, Iowa, cluster, for example, went from having no core activities outside the city itself, to two friends in the surrounding county hosting a total of five devotional gatherings, with several more county friends regularly gathering to celebrate Feasts and consult as a group. One lesson learned this year is that where friends work together with faith and persistence, progress occurs.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

Forty-one individuals are currently pioneering in the region. Two new pioneers moved into priority Milestone 1 clusters, and another youth is offering a year of

The online environment also empowered many to begin holding activities of their own. The Sioux City, Iowa, cluster, for example, went from having no core activities outside the city itself, to two friends in the surrounding county hosting a total of five devotional gatherings, with several more county friends regularly gathering to celebrate Feasts and consult as a group.

The Assembly of Topeka, Kansas, visited friends to help solve technical challenges in setting up Zoom calls. It also helped community members assemble more than a dozen “prayer partners.” In a similar development, the Assembly of St. Louis, Missouri, created “care teams” to visit and run shopping errands for vulnerable members of the community.



service in the region’s Milestone 3 cluster, focusing on an African immigrant population. Meanwhile, the efforts of a family that settled in the Manhattan, Kansas, cluster to pioneer four years ago were central to that cluster’s reaching the second milestone of growth.

Mobilization of youth

Mindful of COVID-19 realities, summer of service efforts focused on three clusters where groups of youth were already active or could be quickly mobilized: Kansas City Area, Missouri/Kansas; Ames/Des Moines, Iowa; and Wichita, Kansas. A selection of institute courses were offered remotely to youths across the region, and some have been approached about offering junior youth and children’s class material to younger siblings who were previously involved in educational activities.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

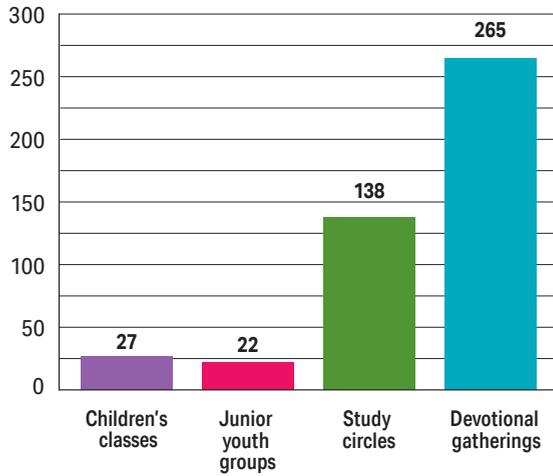
The National Spiritual Assembly’s call for every Bahá’í household to host a devotional gathering prompted many friends to take steps in that direction, some for the first time. Local Spiritual Assemblies played a key role in amplifying the call and removing obstacles. The Assembly of Topeka, Kansas, for example, visited

friends to help solve technical challenges in setting up Zoom calls. It also helped community members assemble more than a dozen “prayer partners.” In a similar development, the Assembly of St. Louis, Missouri, created “care teams” to visit and run shopping errands for vulnerable members of the community.

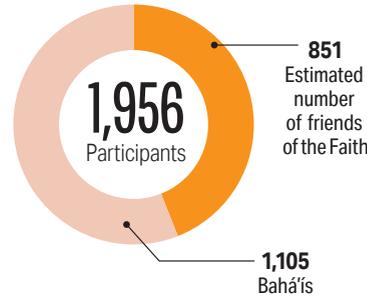
Racial justice and unity

In keeping with the release of the Universal House of Justice’s July 22 message, as well as intense ferment in the larger community, efforts to engage African Americans and to address issues of racial justice were prominent this year. Devotional gatherings focusing on race unity and racial justice were numerous. These ranged from simple one-time efforts to continuing explorations that delve deeply and prayerfully into the history of racial prejudice in America. An initiative offering study of Ruhi Book 8 to African-American believers, originally organized by the Continental Counselors, continued in the St. Louis, Missouri, cluster and will be implemented throughout the region during the One Year Plan. Other efforts included African-American-focused Book 1 study circles and collaboration with a variety of civic and interfaith groups addressing aspects of racial justice.

452 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



Overall participation in all 4 core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

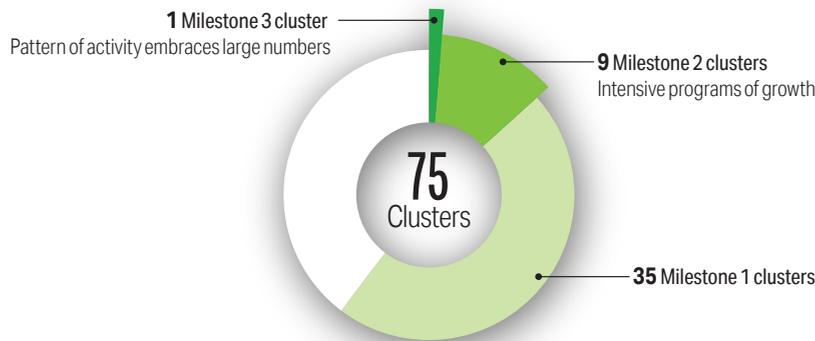
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

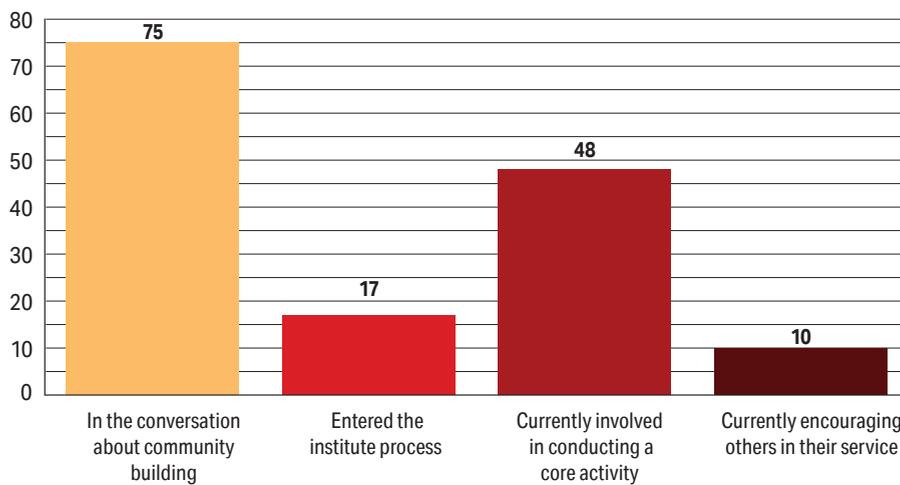
2



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



Regional Bahá'í Council of the South Central States



Continental Counselors have been facilitating gatherings for approximately 40 experienced tutors where they explore various themes and concepts related to tutor preparation and effectiveness, as well as conduct in-depth studies of the revised Ruhi Books 1 and 2. Participating tutors then collaborate with the RTI board to disseminate what they learned to all nine regional groupings.

Protagonists in the four states of the South Central region have been learning how obstacles created by the pandemic can be turned into steppingstones for steady progress. The friends arose valiantly to achieve the Council's goal to not only reach but also surpass 900 devotional gatherings, and are now striving to establish a devotional in every household.

Advancements in programs of growth

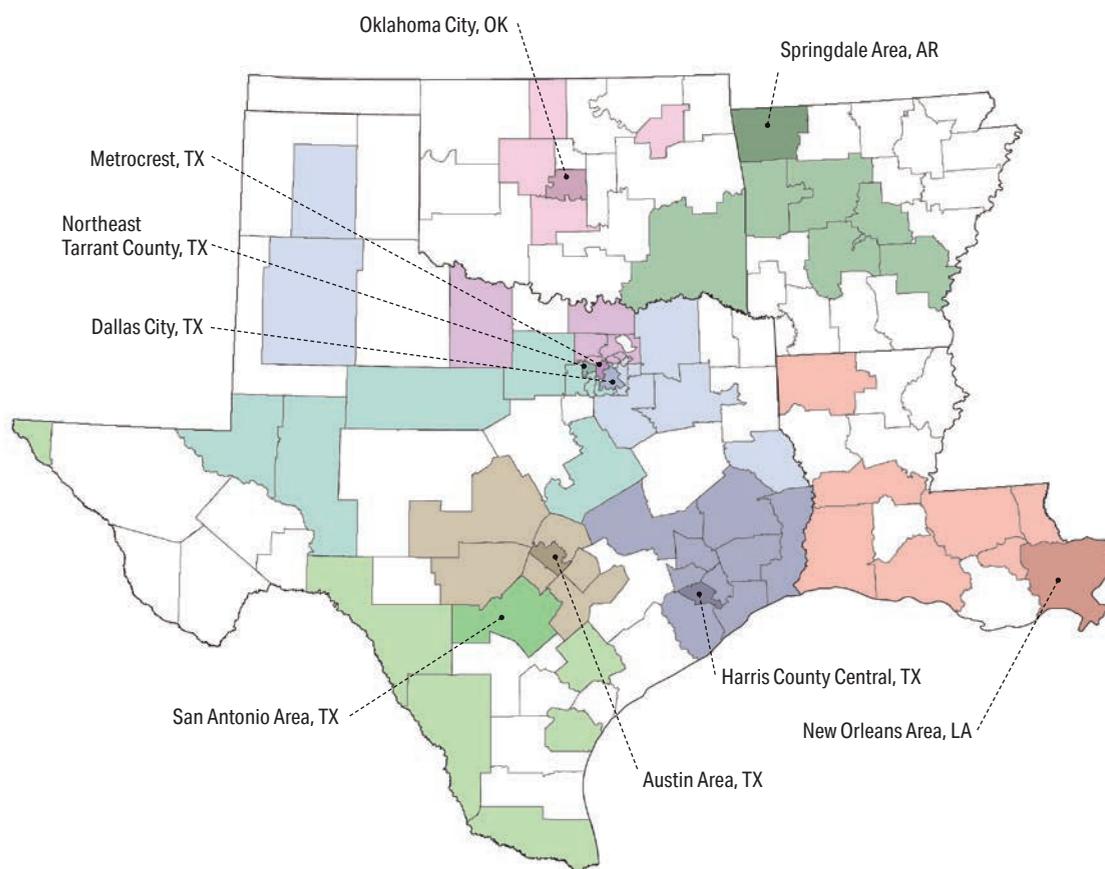
Two additional clusters advanced to the third milestone on the continuum of growth during 2020–21, bringing the total to five. The goal is for all nine reservoir clusters to eventually follow suit and become communities of proven strength that assist those with less experience. Six clusters at the first milestone are advancing toward the second, while another five clusters have the capacity to do so.

Strength of institute training

The Regional Training Institute (RTI) board seeks to improve the effectiveness of active tutors by making them feel part of a large and supportive team. To that end, Continental Counselors have been facilitating gatherings for approximately 40 experienced tutors where they explore various themes and concepts related to tutor preparation and effectiveness, as well as conduct in-depth studies of the revised Ruhi Books 1 and 2. Participating tutors then collaborate with the RTI board to disseminate what they learned to all nine regional groupings. In this way, they have reached approximately 250 tutors, and a team of 40 is meeting regularly to consult about the region's growth.

Several regional children's class coordinators and an experienced collaborator have also been working with the RTI board to consider how a children's class can be at the heart of

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



an expanding nucleus in community-building efforts. Last December, 55 children's class teachers gathered to consider ways this goal could become a reality in their communities. Each of the region's nine groupings is being accompanied to continue this learning in clusters and neighborhoods.

A vibrant learning process centered on the junior youth spiritual empowerment program also began last summer, bringing together experienced animators and those new to this path of service to study guidance, reflect, share insights, and make plans for action.

Participation in core activities

Core activities increased by a third over last year, with a third of participants being friends of the Faith. Devotional gatherings and study circles increased most significantly, while the numbers of junior youth groups and children's classes remained stable. Further, 119

online teaching conferences using the recently developed grassroots materials nurtured 700 participants in their capacity to teach, engage in meaningful conversations, and start devotional gatherings.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

The South Central region is home to almost 80 homefront pioneers, including youths. They reside in urban and suburban focus neighborhoods and in clusters at the first milestone that exhibit a variety of demographic and geographic compositions. A quarterly pioneer reflection meeting gathers these friends to focus on building capacity to serve within the framework of the Five Year Plan, on gaining greater effectiveness as tutors, and on learning how to describe the Faith's community-building efforts and institute process to friends and neighbors.

A quarterly pioneer reflection meeting gathers homefront pioneers to focus on building capacity to serve within the framework of the Five Year Plan, on gaining greater effectiveness as tutors, and on learning how to describe the Faith's community-building efforts and institute process to friends and neighbors.

Youths studying the main sequence of courses in one neighborhood have been creatively furthering the work of expansion and consolidation. The conversation among these young people and those supporting them revolves around embracing large numbers and expanding the nucleus of friends at the center of the process. Consulting together, they find creative ways to engage in the practices prescribed by study circles and to invite other youths into the main sequence.



Mobilization of youth

Over the past year, youths studying the main sequence of courses in one neighborhood have been creatively furthering the work of expansion and consolidation. The conversation among these young people and those supporting them revolves around embracing large numbers and expanding the nucleus of friends at the center of the process. Consulting together, they find creative ways to engage in the practices prescribed by study circles and to invite other youths into the main sequence. The aim over the past two cycles has been to help each person connected to the junior youth spiritual empowerment program to hold a devotional involving his or her entire family.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

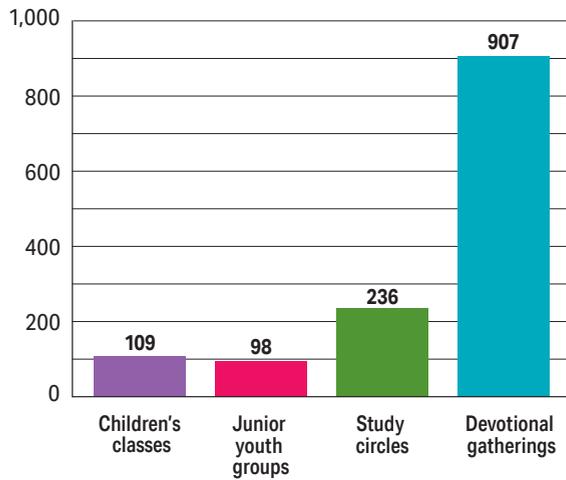
The proliferation of videoconferencing during the year enabled the Council to visit more clusters across the region. Meetings with Local Spiritual Assemblies and cluster agencies led to firsthand learning about the nature of growth

and built closer bonds of fellowship and collaboration with institutions at the grass roots. In January, the Council also started hosting bimonthly regional gatherings titled “Connecting Hearts to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,” which are open to the public. These joyful occasions include prayers, music, stories, videos, and talks by the Master. Their aim is to draw hearts closer to Him in preparation for the commemoration of the Centenary of His Ascension.

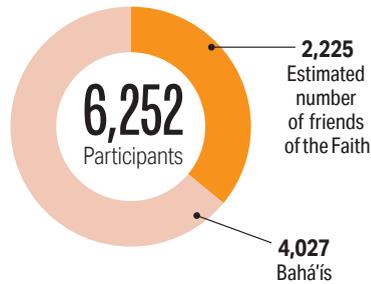
Learning from Area Teaching Committees

To learn and disseminate learning, the Council held three gatherings of Area Teaching Committees (ATCs). Those present at the first heard from clusters where an increase in devotional meetings helped move the cluster to the next level of development. The subsequent virtual gatherings studied the various messages of the Universal House of Justice that were received between May and November 2020. This collaboration enabled a flow of learning and experience between ATCs that has led to a higher level of confidence in each other’s work.

1,350 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



Overall participation in all 4 core activities



Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

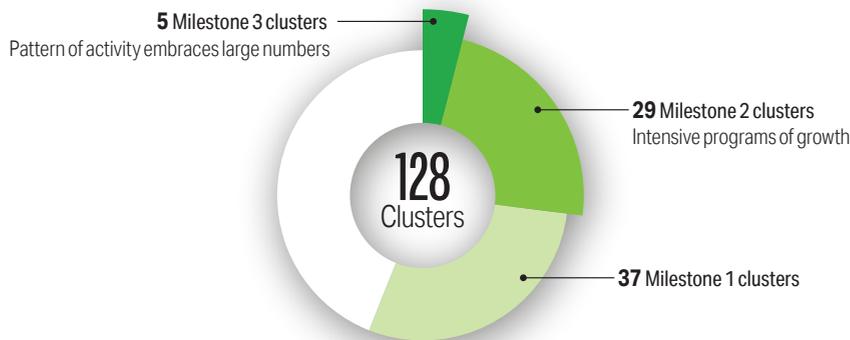
Homefront pioneers

Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020

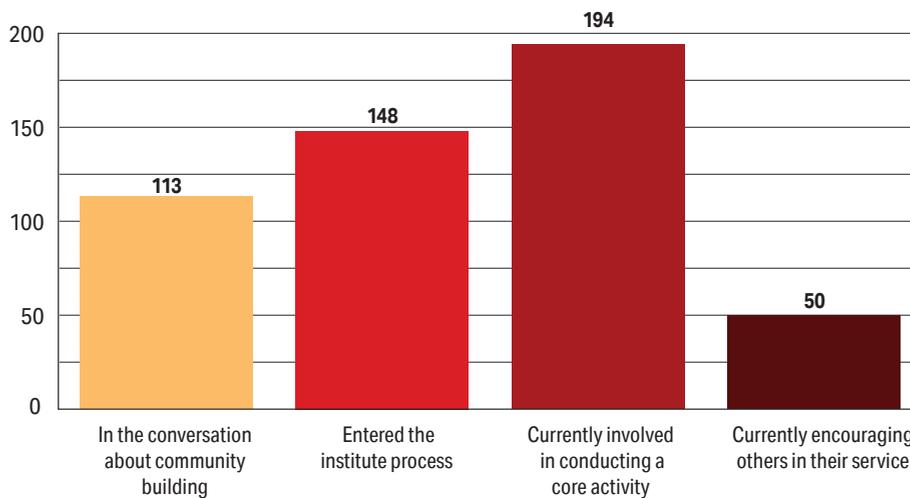
26



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



Regional Bahá'í Council of the **Southeastern States**



A number of tutor effectiveness gatherings have taken place during recent cycles, and with the Regional Training Institute's nurturance, 38 percent of participants in these gatherings have gone on to start Ruhi Book 1 study circles.

Advancements in programs of growth

While there was no change in the status of milestone clusters in the Southeastern States during 2020–21, a significant effort has been underway to build strength in the region's reservoir clusters, involving collaboration between the Regional Council, the Area Teaching Committees, and developing nuclei to ensure they are equipped to accompany neighboring clusters to move toward the next milestone on the continuum of growth.

Strength of institute training

Regional institutions in the Southeast are gaining in capacity to collaborate with the Regional Training Institute (RTI) board, the resource person, and the Continental Counselor accompanying this region. Insights are being sought through learning about tutor effectiveness efforts, while assisting with work on educational imperatives. A number of

tutor effectiveness gatherings have taken place during recent cycles, and with the RTI's nurturance, 38 percent of participants in these gatherings have gone on to start Ruhi Book 1 study circles.

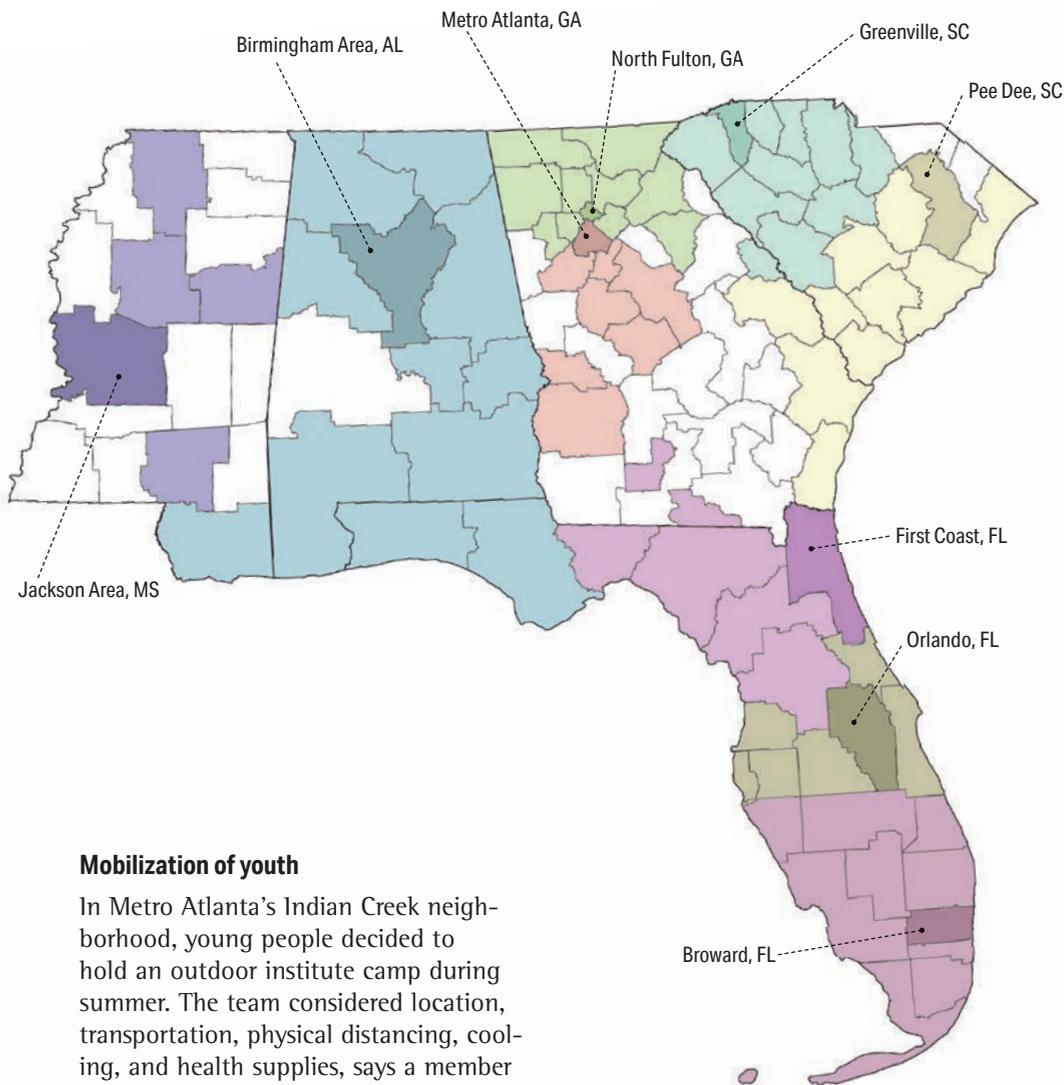
Participation in core activities

Over the past year the numbers of core activities and their participants have shown significant increases, with growth accelerating in recent months. Given the current social and political environment, the opportunities to engage individuals in the core activities have increased, despite restrictions on gathering in person caused by the pandemic.

Deployment of homefront pioneers

A regular monthly call creates an occasion for homefront pioneers, especially those who are isolated, to pray together, study guidance, and share ideas and experiences. An average of 17 pioneers participate in each call.

Cluster groupings and associated reservoir clusters



Mobilization of youth

In Metro Atlanta's Indian Creek neighborhood, young people decided to hold an outdoor institute camp during summer. The team considered location, transportation, physical distancing, cooling, and health supplies, says a member of the Indian Creek neighborhood team who also serves as an Auxiliary Board member. The location of the camp was a backyard a few miles from the focus neighborhood, and youths employed bicycles as their preferred mode of transportation. Bahá'ís in the area provided their own bikes and helmets for those who did not have one. Meals and other supplies were also provided by community members, and some of the Bahá'ís joined and were visited by the young people as part of the Ruhi Book 2 practice of sharing deepening themes. According to one believer, the camp contributed to "a reinvigoration of activity in the neighborhood" and a strengthening of friendships. After the

camp, community-building activities in Indian Creek continued outdoors almost every day, under a big shade tree or on residents' porches.

Quality of community life and its devotional character

Devotional gatherings have continued to increase in the Southeastern States, with close to 900 devotionals taking place on a regular basis. Working with Area Teaching Committees (ATCs), the Council has encouraged a focus on devotional gatherings in helping nuclei to grow during the three-month cycles' expansion phase. To learn about

According to one believer, an outdoor institute camp this past summer in Metro Atlanta contributed to "a reinvigoration of activity in the neighborhood" and a strengthening of friendships. After the camp, community-building activities in the Indian Creek neighborhood continued outdoors almost every day, under a big shade tree or on residents' porches.

South Carolina's Florence community has seen an extraordinarily high number of new believers enrolled during the Plan, most of whom are youths and all of whom are African Americans. Almost all have completed Book 1 of the main sequence of courses. Community building continues apace, with at least half of the new believers engaged in the work—many serving as tutors, youth group animators, and children's class teachers—while remaining involved in devotional gatherings.



strengthening the devotional character of communities within the cluster, the Metro Atlanta ATC recently initiated systematic home-visit campaigns and daily devotionals, accessible online to all. A devotional gathering was held each night during the February 2021 expansion phase as the worldwide Bahá'í community began the last cycle of the Five Year Plan. In this expansion phase, over 50 home visits were, by the time of this writing, made by over 30 individuals and included visits to friends in the Metro Atlanta cluster and the six clusters that adjoin it.”

South Carolina Enterprise

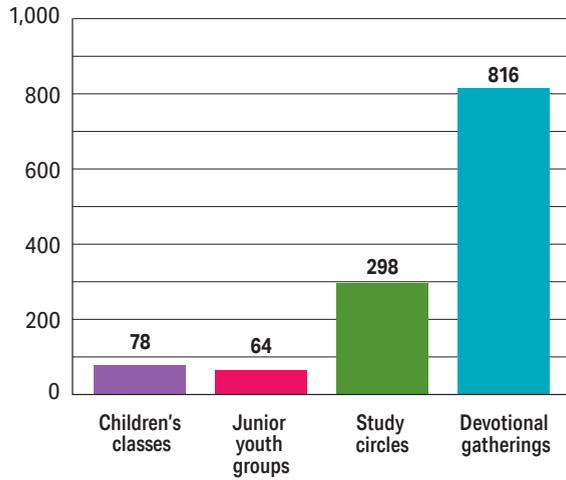
South Carolina's Florence community, situated in the Pee Dee cluster, has seen an extraordinarily high number of new believers enrolled during the Plan, most of whom are youths and all of whom are African Americans. Almost all have completed Book 1 of the main sequence of courses. Community building continues apace, with at least half of the new believers engaged in the work—many serving as tutors, youth

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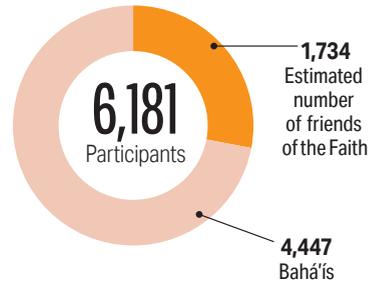
Additional comments

Two areas of collaboration have increased the Council's closeness with the region's Local Spiritual Assemblies. The first developed in response to the Universal House of Justice's message on May 9, 2020. The Council arranged for gatherings with a number of Assemblies to study and consult on the role of Assemblies in the mitigation of suffering in an environment deeply affected by COVID-19. The gatherings allowed for Assemblies to share what they might be doing in this regard and to explore additional opportunities to comfort and assist the community. The second area of accompaniment has focused on building capacity among Assemblies to identify and support expanding nuclei. A number of teaching conferences have taken place around the region, and the Council has been working with the regional grouping teams to further capacity building in this area.

1,256 core activities underway as of October 31, 2020



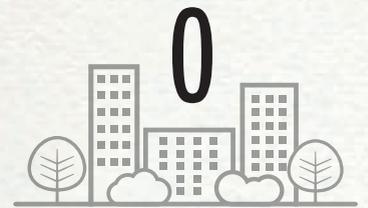
Overall participation in all 4 core activities



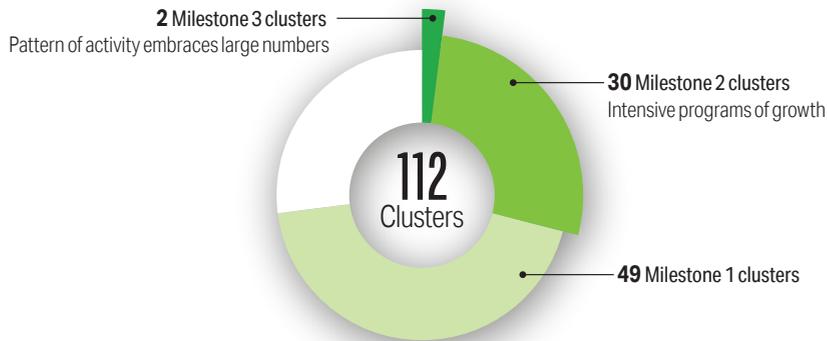
Sources: Five Year Plan Progress Survey, including April 30, 2020, and October 31, 2020, reporting cycles

Homefront pioneers

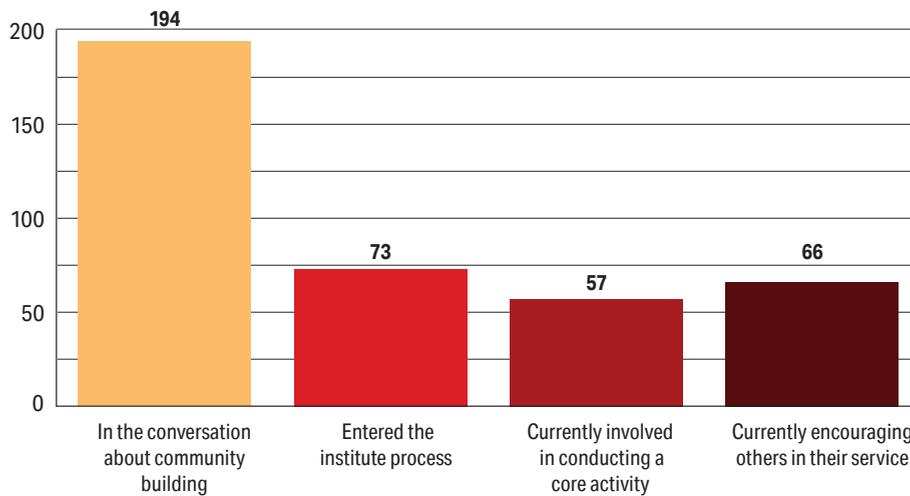
Deployed during the 12 months from November 1, 2019 to October 31, 2020



Programs of growth as of March 17, 2021



Releasing the potential of youth (October 31, 2020, a six-month snapshot)



RADIO BAHÁ'Í **WLGI**, HEMINGWAY, SOUTH CAROLINA

Every hour starts with the Word of God put to music by a Bahá'í musician; at another point each hour, the host shares a quotation from the Bahá'í writings. Daily at 9:30 a.m., Radio Bahá'í shares healing prayers, specifically for those who request prayers and generally for the area's people and communities.

I want the team at Radio Bahá'í to know that y'all are doing a marvelous job[.] I thank you for the informative information that you provide us with involving our local communities, prayers, and the music is just outstanding. Y'all keep up the great work. 2 thumbs up for excellence.

This recent message from a Radio Bahá'í WLGI listener reflects the spirit of the comments from many in the station's primary broadcast area—the five counties surrounding the Louis G. Gregory Bahá'í Institute.

The station's underlying purpose is to promote the oneness of humanity and racial amity. Programming is intended to connect hearts with the love of God and inspire them to serve others. Knowing that the Word of God is the master key to the hearts of all people, and that music is as a ladder for the soul, Radio Bahá'í combines these two powerful forces to promote love for all humanity.

Programming framework

Most of each broadcast day is devoted to music that creates an atmosphere of love and unity. Every song with lyrics is selected for the message in the words, with themes including reliance on God, justice, oneness, nobility, uplifting the oppressed, generosity, kindness, joy, responsibility, trustworthiness, and service to others. The entire playlist of Radio Bahá'í is posted online (at www.spintron.com/wlgi). In 2020, 21 new songs each month on average were added to the playlist.

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includes special programs and a higher concentration of Bahá'í history and Bahá'í-inspired music.

During 2020, Radio Bahá'í aired 223 distinct public service and community calendar announcements, hundreds of times each; 522 short science-related programs; and 50 episodes of the 30-minute *Peace Talks Radio* program, each aired three times.



Station's reach

Of the approximately 600,000 residents in the five-county primary broadcast area, diary-based research from Nielsen indicates the station has about 6,700 listeners per week, with an average of 300 listening every 15 minutes. The station's [Internet live stream](#) had about 29,000 unique listeners worldwide in 2020, with about 10,100 in the United States.

Radio Bahá'í is often heard playing in the background in local businesses, as people appreciate the family-friendly and spiritually uplifting programming. Listeners frequently tell their Bahá'í friends how much they appreciate the station, opening the door to conversations.

Pandemic service

In keeping with Radio Bahá'í's community service role, programming during 2020–21 included a focus on both the material and spiritual dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The station aired



13 news conferences from the governor of South Carolina and the Health Department in the early months, as well as two interviews with an infectious disease specialist. Numerous public service announcements focusing on protecting oneself and others from the coronavirus continue to be aired, along with current information about vaccine availability.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the station began airing the Long Healing Prayer nightly at 10 p.m. A series of 23 encouraging quotes from the Bahá'í writings has been aired thousands of times during the year. When the Unit Convention was canceled, the staff produced and aired spots about the new absentee voting procedures and the spiritual nature of Bahá'í elections.

Operations and maintenance

Radio Bahá'í broadcasts 24 hours per day, seven days a week, 365 days per year with the equivalent of three and a half full-time paid staff members and three volunteers. The station broadcasts in northeastern South Carolina on 90.9 FM and is streamed over the Internet (www.radiobahai.us).

Significant maintenance work this year on the station's 500-foot broadcast tower included rustproofing, painting, and close inspection of the various tower support systems.

Sampling of listener responses

"I listen to WLGI daily—in fact one radio in my house stays on 24/7. I listen first because I know the music and messages are all positive and uplifting."

"I am a faithful listener and love the station and the music. I think you should win a 'Blue Ribbon' for playing such good music. I love you and God Bless You."

"One of my devotional gathering participants who is a regular Radio Bahá'í listener often refers to '*Noble I created thee ...*' as the 'Bahá'í anthem.' She has heard it often enough that she can almost recite the entire quote."

"*Peace Talks Radio* gives me conversation openers for uplifting conversations. For instance, a program on domestic violence described the personalities of abusive men who come through the criminal justice system and how to handle them. That started a conversation that led to sharing [the quotations] '*Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace*' and '*conflict and contention are in no wise permitted.*'"

"I enjoy listening to the station throughout the day and evening. I love the music mix, announcements, and scriptures that you air, and the DJs. I will tell my friends about you."

"I listen to the station as I drive to work and I love it. I enjoy the music and it makes me feel better about going to work."

"I appreciate hearing the Long Healing Prayer every night at 10 p.m. during this time of pandemic, [the] prayer list with morning prayer and the regular weather forecasts."

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Office of Public Affairs

The Office of Public Affairs (OPA), located in Washington, DC, and New York City, represents the National Spiritual Assembly in its relationships with the public, including the US government, the United Nations, members and organizations of civil society, and media outlets. The work of OPA has increasingly gained momentum in public discourse as that aspect of the Greater Plan of God moves inexorably forward and the forces of disintegration have accelerated. Participation in public discourse has gained momentum in the areas of race relations, the role of the media in society, gender equality and the advancement of women, economic inequality, and sustainable development including climate change. Nevertheless, OPA's work in the human rights arena, particularly the defense of the Bahá'ís in Iran, who continue to experience severe persecution by the Iranian government, as well as in Yemen and other countries, has continued uninterrupted.

HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUDING PERSECUTION OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an added sense of urgency to an already dire situation regarding Bahá'í prisoners in Iran and Yemen. Despite the onset of the pandemic and its threat to prisoners in overcrowded conditions, both countries took inadequate measures to ensure their safety. OPA arranged [publicity](#) highlighting that, in Iran, few Bahá'ís benefited from the temporary release of thousands of prisoners due to the pandemic. Moreover, beginning in February 2020, the authorities were threatening to increase rather than decrease the number of Bahá'ís in prison. Bahá'ís were being called to court in far greater numbers, were being sentenced to

longer terms in prison, and were being summoned to serve sentences handed down months or years earlier. They also faced increasingly systematic efforts to promote hate speech and disinformation about the Bahá'í Faith, even accusations of hoarding medical supplies. The oppression from the criminal justice system was nationwide. Particularly hard hit were the Bahá'ís in Shiraz, Birjand, Karaj, Kermanshah, and Bandar Abbas.

OPA secured repeated public statements from the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to call for the cessation of these arbitrary and discriminatory actions. Drawing further attention to this situation, OPA assisted the International Religious Freedom Roundtable's Working Group on Iran with organizing a June 15 panel discussion that included: a representative from the International Organization to Preserve Human Rights in Iran, a Gonabadi Sufi-led group; a Bahá'í representative, Dr. Farhad Sabetan; Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi; and representatives from the Iranian diaspora's Jewish, Christian, Sufi, and Sunni communities. VOA Persian covered the panel discussion and produced an [article](#). Later, OPA and the International Organization to Preserve Human Rights in Iran composed a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, signed by 19 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and sent on July 3, detailing Iran's failure to issue furloughs to religious prisoners of conscience—Bahá'ís, Christians, Sufis, and Sunnis—in numbers proportional to those issued to the general prison population during the pandemic. News coverage was obtained from [BBC Persian](#), [BBC Persian Radio](#), [Kalemeh TV](#), and [Iran International](#). Pressure in the form of arrests,

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Persian Public Information Office94

OPA arranged publicity highlighting that, in Iran, few Bahá'ís benefited from the temporary release of thousands of prisoners due to the pandemic. Moreover, beginning in February 2020, the authorities were threatening to increase rather than decrease the number of Bahá'ís in prison.

On July 30, 2020, six unjustly imprisoned Bahá'ís were released by the Houthi authorities pursuant to an order announced on Yemeni television on March 25 by Mr. Mahdi al-Mashat, president of the Houthis' Supreme Political Council. The longest-serving prisoner, Mr. Hamed bin Haydara, had been detained since December 2013. He had been issued a death sentence, confirmed by an appellate court just three days before Mr. al-Mashat's announcement.

judicial proceedings, and sentencings continued throughout 2020 and into 2021. In [video-recorded remarks](#) made on September 2, Mr. Pompeo augmented the State Department's condemnation of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran by commenting that it was the 40th anniversary of the abduction (on August 21, 1980) of the nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, and called on the international community to hold Iran accountable for their presumed execution. On October 7, the State Department posted on its Facebook page a [video](#) it created about the persecution of the friends in Iran—an unusual undertaking on its part to spotlight the persecution. On November 24, the State Department [condemned](#) coordinated raids that had just taken place on Bahá'í homes across Iran.

The OPA initiatives on behalf of the friends in Iran reached a congressional high point with the unanimous passage of [House Resolution 823](#) on December 7 with a bipartisan group of 94 cosponsors. A robust, bipartisan set of [video-recorded](#) comments in support of the resolution were made by members of Congress on the floor of the House. Wide publicity for the resolution's passage was obtained through [BBC Persian](#), [Iran International](#), [The National](#), [AP News](#), and other outlets.

In addition to the increase in arrests and judicial proceedings across Iran, two appellate court decisions were issued regarding the destruction and confiscation of some 50 homes and farms owned by Bahá'ís in the village of Ivel in 2010. These appellate decisions confirmed a long-delayed lower court decision, issued in November 2019, which brazenly held that the Bahá'í Faith is “heretical and unclean” and that its adherents have “no legitimacy in their ownership.” Though Iranian judges have often stated orally that their decisions against Bahá'ís were due to their religion, rarely in recent years have such opinions been put in writing. Given the decision's affirmation in

writing by two appellate courts, there is concern that it could be used as precedent by courts throughout Iran. Beginning in December 2020, OPA joined the Bahá'í International Community and fellow Bahá'í national public affairs offices in a campaign to spotlight this situation. Muslim organizations in the United States have been among those speaking out with statements: the [American Islamic Congress](#) and the American Islamic Forum for Democracy. An NGO [open letter](#) to the two judges issuing the two appellate court decisions, urging them to reverse their decisions, was signed by a diverse array of faith groups and other organizations. On February 19, *The Wall Street Journal* published an [opinion article](#) by Reza Afshari, a professor emeritus of Pace University who was born into an Iranian Muslim family, that expresses shame about Iran's approval of the confiscation of property owned by Bahá'ís in Ivel and contrasting that action with what he saw as beautiful reflections of a welcoming Persian culture that he observed and felt in the gardens of the Bahá'í World Center during a visit in 2013.

In Yemen, events were no less dramatic, but with a greater number of positive outcomes for the Yemeni Bahá'ís. On July 30, 2020, six unjustly imprisoned Bahá'ís were released by the Houthi authorities pursuant to an order announced on Yemeni television on March 25 by Mr. Mahdi al-Mashat, president of the Houthis' Supreme Political Council. These prisoners' safety had been threatened not only by the pandemic but also, reportedly, by factions among the Houthis that wished to have them executed. The longest-serving prisoner, Mr. Hamed bin Haydara, had been detained since December 2013. He had been issued a death sentence, confirmed by an appellate court on March 22, 2020, just three days before Mr. al-Mashat's announcement. After several days during which the Houthi authorities failed to implement the order, OPA and other Bahá'í public affairs offices

around the world secured [statements](#) and [publicity](#) urging the Houthi authorities to implement it, including a widely distributed [article](#) by the Associated Press and [several statements](#) by the [US ambassador-at-large](#) for international religious freedom, Mr. Sam Brownback. The release order was eventually implemented after considerable back-and-forth with Western governments and the UN agency involved in securing the releases. Unfortunately, the prosecutor in Sana'a has continued to pursue unjustified cases against 19 other Bahá'ís in Yemen and has not conceded that five of the friends who departed Yemen on July 30 are no longer subject to prosecution. Hearings continue and the prosecutor has been attempting to have these 19 appear in court, which would, based on past experience, result in their immediate arrest and indefinite detention. OPA will continue to spotlight the situation and make efforts to secure US government interventions until the rights of the Yemeni Bahá'í community are fully restored.

OPA reached out to the Defending Freedoms Project, which operates under the auspices of the Congressional Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and encourages members of Congress to “adopt” and publicize the cases of individuals who have been incarcerated for exercising basic freedoms, such as religion or belief. OPA’s human rights officer facilitated the agreement of the Commission and USCIRF to highlight the particularly compelling story of Mr. Ardeshir Fanaian, an Iranian Bahá'í. Mr. Fanaian was born while his mother was serving a prison sentence for being a member of the Bahá'í Faith, and he also has been repeatedly imprisoned because of his adherence to the Faith. On December 11, Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois agreed to adopt him.

The US State Department’s annual International Religious Freedom Report again documented in detail, with OPA’s assistance, the persecution of the Bahá'ís of Iran as well as in Yemen. The Office liaised with State Department

officials to support the efforts of the US Mission to the UN to advocate for the Bahá'ís in Iran, including the December 16 passage of the 2020 General Assembly resolution on human rights violations in Iran, which specifically mentioned the persecution of the Bahá'ís and emphasized the need to protect religious minorities unrecognized in Iran’s constitution and laws.

Other issues

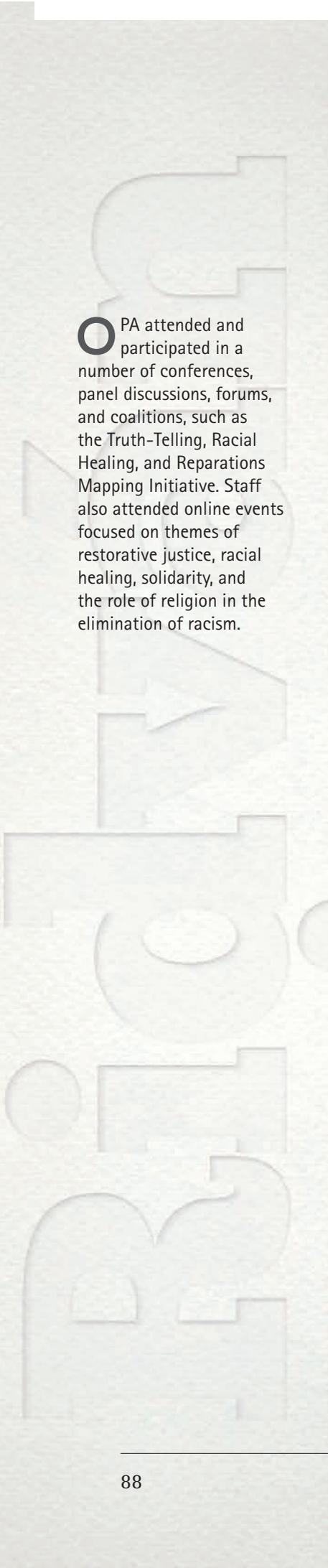
OPA continued to support the Washington Working Group on the International Criminal Court (WICC) as it went through a leadership transition. OPA also participated in a task force to identify policy options for US engagement with the International Criminal Court (ICC). This task force was supported and guided by a bipartisan advisory group focused on how the ICC intersects with US interests important to faith-based groups—in such areas as accountability for international crime, promotion of the rule of law, prevention of atrocity crimes, strengthening of international institutions, peace negotiations, and conflict resolution. Of great interest are the institutionalization of democratic norms, such as due process, criminal accountability, and the support of human rights in general. WICC’s position has long been that US engagement with the ICC should be nurtured.

OPA interacted with numerous NGOs and cultivated relationships with many prominent actors in Washington, DC, on human rights-related issues, including the criminal justice discourse.

RACE DISCOURSE

The Office continued to pursue its long-standing engagement on issues of racial justice and racial unity, primarily through the work of two race discourse officers. They cultivated relationships with colleagues from civil society and government, meeting and consulting with new and established contacts in government agencies, NGOs, universities, and community organizations—in order to learn more about their work,

OPA continued to support the Washington Working Group on the International Criminal Court as it went through a leadership transition. OPA also participated in a task force to identify policy options for US engagement with the International Criminal Court (ICC). This task force was supported and guided by a bipartisan advisory group focused on how the ICC intersects with US interests important to faith-based groups.



OPA attended and participated in a number of conferences, panel discussions, forums, and coalitions, such as the Truth-Telling, Racial Healing, and Reparations Mapping Initiative. Staff also attended online events focused on themes of restorative justice, racial healing, solidarity, and the role of religion in the elimination of racism.

share more about OPA's interests and efforts, and explore opportunities for collaboration and partnership. At the same time, they worked to read society and gain a deeper understanding of the national discourse on race: by studying a wide range of content from writers, thinkers, and activists, and by attending a number of events in Washington, DC, and throughout the nation, exploring varied issues connected with race from many perspectives. OPA staff continued to consult and collaborate with Bahá'ís around the country who have a range of expertise and experience with issues of race, exploring together the institutional guidance and conceptual framework that inform OPA's efforts, drawing upon the learning of the Office and of the friends in their multifaceted efforts, and working together to find opportunities for engagement in and contribution to the national-level discourse.

OPA attended and participated in a number of conferences, panel discussions, forums, and coalitions, such as the [Truth-Telling, Racial Healing, and Reparations Mapping Initiative](#). Staff also attended online events focused on themes of restorative justice, racial healing, solidarity, and the role of religion in the elimination of racism. The Office continued its efforts to learn more about creating social spaces, including the Dialogue on Faith and Race, a quarterly discussion series that OPA has convened in partnership with The Catholic University of America since January 2017. OPA has hosted eight of the 15 gatherings, which bring together representatives of about three dozen national-level faith-based organizations in Washington to consider issues of race from a spiritual perspective. Each session centers on a topic such as the relationship between justice and unity or the roles of individual, community, and institutions in eliminating racism.

As part of its contribution to the discourse on race, OPA has generated discussion papers, presentations, thought pieces, and other materials. These incorporate concepts and ideas inspired by the teachings of the Faith

and the Bahá'í community's experience in applying them.

To assist Local Spiritual Assemblies with their engagement in the prevalent discourses of society, the race discourse officers created a webinar with supporting materials. It will support Assemblies in reading their reality and engaging in public discourse as it develops naturally.

A National Race Unity Symposium has begun to take shape through consultations with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Center. This symposium is part of the broader process of engaging in the national discourse on race and, as such, will be pursued within that framework. The conference will provide an opportunity to work with others engaged in the elimination of racism—to transcend language and practices that are inherently divisive, and to unite on the basis of common beliefs and principles.

MEDIA RELATIONS

Print media and television

OPA produced and distributed press releases highlighting the meetings and events it organized, and worked with individuals and reporters to publish articles on the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Yemen under the direction of the Office's media officer.

Six press releases were issued concerning the Bahá'ís in Iran, the Bahá'ís in Yemen, and racial justice. Several of these releases were picked up by prominent news outlets, including the Associated Press.

Opinion articles were written and published about the friends in Iran and Yemen in outlets such as *The Wall Street Journal* and the [Religion News Service](#). Outlets such as [Reuters](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), [Voice of America](#), [Al-Monitor](#), [The National](#), and others published news and analysis articles on related developments. The passage of House Resolution 823 was noted in articles by [BBC Persian](#), [The Hill](#), [Agence France-Presse](#), and others.

Social media

Facebook and Twitter were utilized to share news about the situations of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Yemen, as well as articles and information about the continuing discourses in OPA's other areas of interest.

Correspondence with individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions

OPA regularly corresponded with Bahá'ís around the country who had media-related inquiries. The media officer worked with Local Spiritual Assemblies and their public information officers to help coordinate local media efforts.

OPA collaborated with *The American Bahá'í* to keep the US Bahá'í community apprised of events related to defense of the Bahá'ís in Iran and Yemen, as well as updates related to discourse areas such as race. It coordinated various campaigns in defense of the friends in Iran and Yemen with the Bahá'í International Community.

Discourse work: conferences, talks, and travel

The media officer hosted 11 media roundtables, each focusing on a number of themes central to media discourse. Journalists and media thinkers from news outlets and organizations such as *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, *Mother Jones*, and many others attended these conversations.

The media officer produced and edited six episodes of OPA's podcast *Illumine America* and issued three newsletters for an audience of media contacts and other organizations.

The media officer was interviewed by *Atlantic* writer Amanda Ripley about Bahá'í approaches to consultation and conflict; some of the interview's content will appear in a forthcoming book.

COMMUNICATIONS

Through its communications manager, OPA corresponded with the US Bahá'í community, Local Spiritual Assemblies,

and Bahá'í agencies on many public affairs-related topics, as well as with government and public agencies, national-level organizations, and prominent people. Topics included:

- Human rights
- The Middle East, such as the defense of the Bahá'ís in Iran and engagement with members of Congress through Bahá'í delegation advocacy and relationship building
- Interfaith organizations
- Controversial issues drawing public attention

Public affairs training materials were posted on the [Public Affairs page](#) of the national Bahá'í website. These materials share insights and best practices to assist Local Spiritual Assemblies in their management of local public affairs issues and to better understand how such matters are managed at the national and international levels.



UNITED NATIONS

The Bahá'ís of the United States United Nations Office (USUN) is affiliated with the United Nations (UN) through its Department of Global Communications (UNDGC). USUN works closely with the [Civil Society Unit](#) of UNDGC and is one of approximately 1,500 nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) associated with the UN that support efforts to disseminate information on its top-priority issues. NGOs associated with UNDGC help build grassroots knowledge and support for the organization.

The media officer hosted 11 media roundtables, each focusing on a number of themes central to media discourse. Journalists and media thinkers from news outlets and organizations such as *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The Huffington Post*, *Mother Jones*, and many others attended these conversations.

USUN organized a virtual event as part of the global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign. In 2020, the campaign continued to call for the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention C190, with a particular focus on informal women workers whose lives and livelihoods have been acutely impacted by COVID-19 and the unprecedented economic crisis that has followed.

As COVID-19 spread, the UN closed its headquarters in New York to the public—as with its other offices around the world—until further notice, and its work has continued “via novel means.” The much-anticipated 75th General Assembly (GA) annual session and its general debate ([#UN75](#)) were held mostly in a virtual forum starting September 2020. In addition to the pandemic, the Assembly addressed racism, intolerance, inequality, climate change, poverty, hunger, armed conflict, and other global challenges, many of which are among OPA’s areas of interest.

The UN anticipated a [Decade of Action, 2020–30](#), for accelerating sustainable solutions to the remaining challenges ahead to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)), a vision to end poverty, rescue the planet, and build a peaceful world by mobilizing more governments, civil society and businesses, and calling on all people to make the goals their own.

The USUN Office is engaging the SDGs in the following ways:

Goal 13: Climate Action.

USUN’s principal representative worked with the Committee of Religious NGOs Climate Working Group, which is strategizing contributions it can make to the United Nations [Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) conference ([COP26](#)) scheduled to be held in fall 2021. The representative also worked with the Parliament of the World’s Religions Climate Action Task Force, which republished [Faith for Earth: A Call for Action](#).

Goal 5: Gender Equality.

USUN participated in the 65th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW65), which took place in March 2021 in a hybrid format of mostly virtual meetings. The priority theme for CSW65 was women’s full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence—necessary for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. As part of this, USUN

organized a session on men’s contribution to the advancement of women.

USUN organized a virtual event as part of the global [16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence](#) campaign. In 2020, the campaign continued to call for the ratification of the International Labour Organization’s Violence and Harassment Convention [C190](#), with a particular focus on informal women workers whose lives and livelihoods have been acutely impacted by COVID-19 and the unprecedented economic crisis that has followed. The USUN event focused on informal working women of color. The issues presented included marginalization, disenfranchisement, and lack of safety nets in times of crisis.

USUN is a member of [A Call to Men’s Healthy Manhood and Masculinities Collaborative](#). The principal representative is a regular participant in [CONNECT NYC Men’s Roundtable](#), which focuses on keeping women and children safe by doing prevention and intervention work with men and boys who are causing harm in families and communities.

Youth contributions to the SDGs

Today, there are 1.8 billion people ages 10–24—the largest generation of youth in history. The UN sees youth as critical thinkers, change makers, innovators, communicators, and leaders. The youth representative for USUN is the cochair of the UNDGC [Youth Representatives Steering Committee](#), which held a virtual event commemorating [International Youth Day](#) under the theme “A Decade of Action for Youth Engagement.” The youth representative offered opening and closing remarks, sharing stories of youth activism in New York City and of young collaborators around the world responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. She also moderated a panel of fellow UNDGC youth representatives at the [World Green Growth Summit](#), a two-day virtual conference whose various strands included the youth-oriented “Shaping our Future Together.”



GENDER EQUALITY AND THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

Through the efforts of its representative for Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women (AOW representative) and its human rights officer, OPA pursued activities in several spaces to advance public thought and action toward the realization of the equality of women and men in society.

OPA furthered its activities as a member of two civil society coalitions: the Interfaith Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence (IC), a group of national faith-based organizations advocating for public policies in support of the well-being of women and girls; and the US Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (CSWG), convened by the US Institute of Peace (USIP), which recognizes the instrumental role of women and gender equality in forging and sustaining peace. It also increased its engagement with the Women of Color Advancing Peace, Security and Conflict Transformation (WCAPS) network and the affiliated Organizations In Solidarity group, which seek to enhance diversity, inclusion, and equity in the foreign relations, peace, and security fields.

Through the IC, the AOW representative and human rights officer moderated two panels as part of a Domestic Violence Awareness Month learning series

that addressed connections between economic inequality and gender-based violence, and explored alternative models for safety and justice that draw on restorative justice approaches.

As an extension of its involvement with CSWG and WCAPS, OPA hosted a monthly Zoom discussion series on Gender Equality, Peace, and Security with practitioners across civil society, government, and academia. Among the themes were redefining security at home and abroad, countering narratives of hate and exclusion, advancing racial justice, engaging men and boys, and examining nonviolent movements. Speakers included, among others, Ms. Bonnie Jenkins, founder of WCAPS and a former ambassador recently nominated as under secretary of state for arms control and international security affairs; Dr. Maria Stephan, director of the Non-Violent Action Program at USIP; and Dr. Layli Maparyan, executive director of Wellesley Centers for Women. A special session in October 2020, honoring the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Women's Conference and the 20th anniversary of the United Nations Security Council on Women, Peace and Security, featured a panel discussion with Dr. Kathleen Kuehnast, USIP's senior gender advisor; Ms. Layli Miller-Muro, executive director of the Tahirih Justice Center; and Dr. Michael Penn, professor of psychology at Franklin and Marshall College, who

The representative for Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women and the human rights officer moderated two panels as part of a Domestic Violence Awareness Month learning series that addressed connections between economic inequality and gender-based violence, and explored alternative models for safety and justice that draw on restorative justice approaches.

The representative for sustainable development has been active in the US Climate Action Network, the Washington Interreligious Staff Community Working Group on Energy & Ecology, and the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (including an intervention at its annual conference), as well as in spaces organized by the Environmental Protection Agency, EcoAmerica, Interfaith Power and Light, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

shared reflections on the BIC statement titled “Developing New Dynamics of Power Toward Social Transformation.”

In January 2021, OPA hosted a seminar facilitated by Gender Equity and Reconciliation International on “Becoming Whole Together: Transforming Relationships Together.” This was followed by a February panel organized by the human rights officer on the role of religion in advancing gender equality, which helped OPA build new relationships and renewed its participation in a conversation to which it has contributed in various ways in past years.

ECONOMIC JUSTICE

In 2020, OPA further systematized its participation in the discourse on economic inequality, with coordination by its economic justice discourse officer. OPA developed relationships with several national economic policy and research organizations as it convened a quarterly discussion space on addressing extreme economic inequality, with particular focus on its moral and spiritual roots. Participants discussed a paper drafted by OPA on individual and collective moral empowerment; engaged with a guest speaker whose research focuses on the efforts of wealthy people to shift from a culture of accumulation to a culture of redistribution; and began a deeper exploration of the intersections between economic and racial injustice and conceptions of power in approaches to social change. The move to an online platform in May 2020 allowed this ongoing discussion to include people outside the District of Columbia and several Bahá’í collaborators.

During a year when the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened awareness of economic injustice and the desire for change, OPA attended numerous virtual conferences and panels to strengthen its reading of society and to identify constructive opportunities for engagement. These included events hosted by the following organizations, among others:

Groundwork Collaborative, the National Community Redevelopment Coalition, New America, Prosperity Now, and the Catholic-inspired Economy of Francesco US network; staff members from these organizations also participated in OPA-convened discussions.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The sustainable development portfolio remains focused on environment-related lines of action, including climate change and faith-based climate action, climate finance, sustainable consumption, and consumerism. The vast majority of its work has been carried out effectively though online engagement.

The representative for sustainable development has been active in the US Climate Action Network, the Washington Interreligious Staff Community Working Group on Energy & Ecology, and the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (including an intervention at its annual conference), as well as in spaces organized by the Environmental Protection Agency, EcoAmerica, Interfaith Power and Light, and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. In addition, the representative responded to relevant opportunities as they arose throughout the year.

Further, OPA was involved in the planning and delivery of two relevant conferences: Good Trouble for a Healthy Planet and Faith for Nature. In addition to contributing relevant thought to the planning and content of these conferences, the representative interacted with a broad variety of faith groups from across the country.

The representative acted to deepen a number of relationships by conducting conversations related to the concepts of consumption, hope, diversity, and inclusion. He wrote a [brief article](#), posted on the Public Affairs website, addressing COVID-19, Earth Day, and the concept of unity.

Coordination of ISGP seminars

The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) is a nonprofit research and educational organization. At the heart of its work is an exploration of how science and religion, conceived of as two complementary systems of knowledge and practice, can be drawn on to achieve positive and enduring change for the betterment of the world. In the context of its mission—to create spaces in which individuals and groups concerned with social transformation can come together to explore the elements of a framework for thought and action that is inspired by both science and religion—ISGP offers seminars for university undergraduates, graduate students, and young professionals. In the United States, the National Spiritual Assembly has made it possible to offer these seminars at the permanent Bahá'í schools and at other affiliated facilities, including the following:

- Bosch Bahá'í School, in Santa Cruz, California
- Green Acre Bahá'í School, in Eliot, Maine
- Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute, in West Palm Beach, Florida
- Desert Rose Bahá'í Institute, in Eloy, Arizona

Seminars for undergraduate students

The purpose of the ISGP seminars is to raise the consciousness of youth about the importance of engaging in action and discourse directed toward social change; to develop their capacity to reflect, to analyze, and to learn from action; to explore elements of a conceptual framework for contributing to the advancement of civilization; to

provide them with tools to understand and analyze the culture in which they are immersed as well as the content of the university courses they are studying; to help them assume ownership of their education; and to assist them in their efforts to acquire the kind of knowledge that will enable them to live fruitful, productive, and meaningful lives. The program for undergraduate students consists of a four-year series of annual 10-day seminars.

Developments in 2020–21

In April 2020, as the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic increasingly became apparent, ISGP encouraged coordinators and facilitators to find creative ways for participants to come together and deepen their understanding of concepts that have the power to resolve many of the problems being experienced by society, and to consult on ways to bring comfort to others and rekindle hope in their hearts for the better future that awaits humanity. Toward this end, gatherings were organized in various units across the United States in which groups of participants met online and reviewed concepts and principles particularly relevant to present conditions.

As restrictions associated with the pandemic continued to affect the ability to hold the ISGP seminars, gatherings were organized for Bahá'í university students to continue to connect with one another and advance their study of the seminar program. In keeping with this, units created online spaces for participants to study a selection of documents from the seminar materials.

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Persian Public Information Office

Persian Media Productions' accomplishments included producing over 30 items of media content on the themes of racism, racial justice, the appreciation of diversity, and how to raise prejudice-free children. These productions took the form of television programs, documentary films, animation, video reports, live Instagram posts, podcasts, photo collages, a virtual art gallery, and journal articles.

The Persian Public Information Office (PPIO) provides the general public with accurate, up-to-date information about the Bahá'í Faith, particularly with regard to the Faith's origins, aims, history, and current status in Iran. The PPIO also answers a variety of requests for expert advice and assistance from the offices and agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly as well as from the sizable Persian-speaking membership of the Bahá'í community of the United States. The Office is presently composed of three departments:

- Persian Office at the Bahá'í National Center
- Persian Media Productions (PMP)
- Persian Bahá'í Media Service (PBMS)

Each department closely collaborates with the others to provide information about the Bahá'í Faith in a wide variety of forms to the Persian-speaking public and others in the United States and abroad.

PERSIAN OFFICE

The principal objective of the Persian Office is to meet the needs of the offices and agencies of the Bahá'í National Center that pertain to Persian-speaking Bahá'ís. During 2020–21, the Office continued to carry out its regular tasks of preparing the Persian pages of *The American Bahá'í* and translating to Persian, on the National Spiritual Assembly's behalf, messages addressed to the Bahá'í community both for Nineteen Day Feast gatherings and for special purposes. The Office is also regularly called on to translate various letters written both to and from individual believers, and to provide information to and consult with various offices of the Bahá'í National Center about the continuing persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran.

The Office also serves the needs of Iranian Bahá'ís in the United States. This

includes facilitating the integration of recent Iranian Bahá'í immigrants into American Bahá'í community life, the provision of academic documentation to Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) students, and the certification of marriages contracted outside the United States.

During 2020–21, through the efforts of its Persian Review Panel, the Office continued efforts to make authorized Persian-language Bahá'í publications widely available to Persian speakers across the world.

PERSIAN MEDIA PRODUCTIONS

Launched in October 2011, Persian Media Productions (PMP) produces and distributes Bahá'í-inspired media content on the most pressing issues facing the people of Iran, particularly those pertaining to youth. PMP also builds media-production capacity among young Iranians both in the larger society and in the Bahá'í community.

PMP's efforts in 2020–21 were focused on the themes of youth and their role in society, gender equality and the advancement of women, the elimination of prejudice, the environment, human rights, and building a better future for Iran and its people.

Significant efforts were also devoted this year to the producing of media content addressing themes the Universal House of Justice and National Assembly have emphasized in their most recent messages and letters—such as the pandemic's impact on a rethinking of our values and on racial justice.

During 2020–21, PMP's accomplishments included producing over 30 items of media content on the themes of racism, racial justice, the appreciation of diversity, and how to raise prejudice-free children. These productions took the form of television programs,

documentary films, animation, video reports, live Instagram posts, podcasts, photo collages, a virtual art gallery, and journal articles.

PERSIAN BAHÁ'Í MEDIA SERVICE

Persian Bahá'í Media Service (PBMS) produces programs that support the work of community building in Iran, chiefly by developing content useful for the continuing education of those who are actively interested in the Faith and for those who wish to share it with friends and family.

PBMS broadcasts a 45-minute daily radio program, *Payam-e Doost*, and two weekly hourlong television programs. The TV programs are broadcast via two Persian satellite stations, Pars TV and Andisheh TV, whose reach extends into Iran. Programs are also offered on ZarinTV, an Afghan Internet TV channel.

PBMS makes 24-hour audio streaming available via satellite to Europe and the Middle East. Listeners around the world access content using a free application on their smartphones, the PBMS website (at persianbahaimedia.org), or the GLWIZ network. PBMS is also accessible on Instagram, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, Podcast, and SoundCloud.

During 2020–21, PBMS's achievements included:

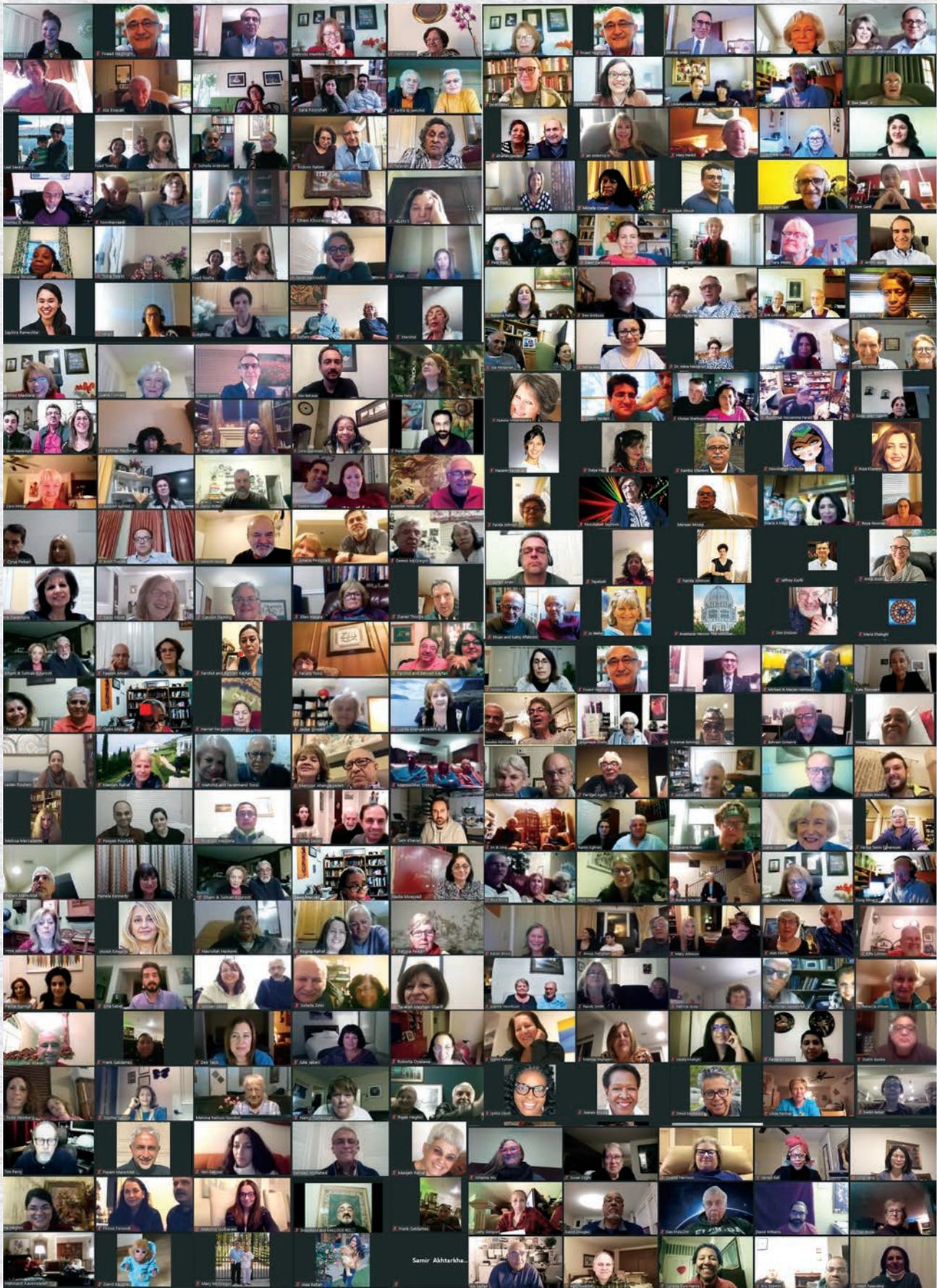
- The assembling of a team of collaborators to assist producers to better understand the needs of the PBMS audience, and to create content that supports the community-building efforts of Iran's Bahá'ís. To facilitate such production and ensure that program content is aligned with the organization's purposes, PBMS:
 - ❖ Created and conducted surveys on current productions as well as pilots of new productions, then collected and analyzed the results.
 - ❖ Coordinated occasions for consultation among producers/production teams and people experienced in the creation of material

supporting the community-building efforts of the PBMS audience. These consultations include time to study guidance from the Faith's senior institutions, reflect on it, and exchange ideas and experience.

- ❖ Adopted a new approach in which one or two people with firsthand experience in the community-building work are assigned to accompany writers and producers in the creation of supportive media. This includes consultation and reflection on content, language, and style of program delivery.
- The production and broadcast of two series of podcasts: *Podcaste Haft*, broadcast on Fridays and dedicated to topics related to the community-building work; and *Bulletin*, aired on Thursdays to address a variety of public discourses important to the target audience.

During 2020–21, Persian Bahá'í Media Service's achievements included the assembling of a team of collaborators to assist producers to better understand the needs of the PBMS audience, and to create content that supports the community-building efforts of Iran's Bahá'ís.





Treasury

In a year characterized by the disintegrating effects of materialism, racial unrest, and the global pandemic, the Fund Development department in the Office of the Treasurer took time to evaluate the benefits derived from its programs and sought to bring them into an even greater alignment with guidance from the Universal House of Justice. This reinforced the department's emphasis on the spiritual dimensions of giving, on universal participation, and on the ways spiritual and material coherence act as building blocks for a unified civilization.

While in-person fundraising events were impossible during the pandemic, staff collaborated with an expanding nucleus of friends from around the country, as well as local and regional institutions, to offer a virtual webinar and fundraiser titled "The Promise of World Peace and Funds of the Faith." Friends from across the country responded, from Washington state to Florida, from New York and New Jersey to Texas. Staff members celebrated as a more diverse group of participants attended webinars, town halls, and virtual fundraisers, and increased both the frequency of contributions and levels of giving to the National Fund. In a period of eight months, over a thousand believers attending these virtual gatherings contributed more than \$2.6 million. This was the highest level of contributions through fundraisers in recent years.

Fund Development staff joined regional and local collaborators to reflect, consult, and study guidance after each event, a process that gave birth to plans for a second wave of virtual fundraisers during the coming One Year Plan titled "We are the Builders of the Kingdom." One of the blessings associated with virtual events has been the opportunity

for more friends to participate, considering that there is no limit on the number who can take part.

Online Contribution System (OCS) adding new features

After years of listening to user comments on how to make the Online Contribution System easier and more intuitive to use, a reconfigured version, OCS 5.0, will launch in the coming year with a brand new look and new features such as the ability to accept contributions made through PayPal and a provision for users to set personal and institutional fund goals. The system will also allow Local Spiritual Assemblies to establish local Fund earmarks, such as designating contributions for a Bahá'í Center.

Communications and new webinar offerings

Restrictions on in-person gatherings provided an opportunity to explore a variety of online workshops, including "Giving During Times of Economic Uncertainty," the first in a series of brief online deepenings; "Creating and Managing a Humanitarian Fund," intended for Local Spiritual Assemblies; and a webinar for new believers offered in collaboration with Local Spiritual Assembly members. In addition, staff members developed and shared a webinar for youths and young adults on the spiritual obligation to prepare a will. Finally, the *Bahá'í Treasurers Bulletin* and *Family Fund Newsletter* informed and uplifted the American Bahá'í community throughout the year.

Properties Relief Fund

The Properties Relief Fund was established in September in response to unexpected and urgent needs stemming from damage caused by forest fires to the Bosch Bahá'í School property in Northern California. By December, believers reached the \$250,000 threshold

TREASURY

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Statements of activities [100](#)

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Planned Giving also launched an initiative, to be fully implemented during the coming One Year Plan, to raise awareness of the spiritual obligation to write a will and testament. The friends may wish to consider using this 100th anniversary of the beloved Master's passing to offer up this task out of love for 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

needed for initial repairs and a high insurance deductible, and that Fund's operation was temporarily ceased. It will be reopened once the National Spiritual Assembly approves a rebuilding and expansion plan for Bosch.

Planned Giving department

In collaboration with representatives of the Board of Trustees of Huqúqu'lláh in the United States, the Planned Giving department produced an updated version of *The Writing of a Will and Testament*. This new booklet includes a section on Huqúqu'lláh and is available in PDF format through the national Bahá'í website (at www.bahai.us/community/resources/planned-giving). Planned Giving also launched an initiative, to be fully implemented during the coming One Year Plan, to raise awareness of the spiritual obligation to write a will and testament. The friends may wish to consider using this 100th anniversary of the beloved Master's passing to offer up this task out of love for 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who about the matter wrote:

. . . it should be noted that the question of the will is of extreme importance: everyone should devote the most serious attention to drawing up a will, so that there should be no one who doth not have a will. This is one of the binding laws of this mighty Dispensation. We ask God to bestow a blessing upon your affairs so that they may prosper abundantly.

Estate bequests continued to be an important source of revenue for the National Fund and an avenue for the friends to leave a legacy for the benefit of humankind. The friends also continued to make contributions through tax-advantaged instruments such as appreciated stock donations, Donor Advised Funds, and IRA charitable roll-overs. Numerous friends took advantage of the Charitable Gift Annuity program offered by the National Spiritual Assembly, which provides partial tax deductions as well as a lifetime stream of annual income to the friends.

The education of the believers regarding tools available to contribute to the Funds of the Faith continues with online webinars (including Persian translations, if needed) and updated information on the national website (at www.bahai.us/community/resources/planned-giving).

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

Combined statements of financial position

Generally Accepted Accounting Principles presentation

10 months ended February 28, 2021, and fiscal year ended April 30, 2020

Assets	National Bahá'í Fund	Publishing Trust	Combined total	
			February 2021 unaudited	April 2020 audited
Current assets				
Cash and investments	\$ 6,796,368	\$ 143,988	\$ 6,940,356	\$ 10,698,061
Investments	31,877,471	-	31,877,471	24,169,368
Due (to)/from other Funds	10,312,547	(10,312,547)	-	-
Accounts and notes receivable	1,746,060	16,527	1,762,587	1,633,400
Inventories	89,710	268,425	358,135	409,153
Other current assets	825,142	13,423	838,565	1,073,125
Total current assets	\$ 51,647,298	\$ (9,870,184)	\$ 41,777,114	\$ 37,983,107
Property and equipment net of accumulated depreciation	\$ 46,224,319	-	\$ 46,224,319	\$ 47,420,406
Investments	37,449,628	-	37,449,628	28,394,155
Other assets	2,928,346	-	2,928,346	760,018
Receivable under Trusts	413,913	-	413,913	2,579,028
Total assets	\$ 138,663,504	\$ (9,870,184)	\$ 128,793,320	\$ 117,136,714
Liabilities and net assets				
Liabilities				
Current liabilities				
Short-term debt	\$ 15,806,859	\$ -	\$ 15,806,859	\$ 16,148,091
Accounts payable and accrued liabilities	1,014,043	3,888	1,017,931	2,690,623
Amounts payable to International Funds	1,251,667	-	1,251,667	1,705,778
Deferred revenues	-	11,109	11,109	9,938
Gift annuities, current portion	684,388	-	684,388	601,033
Total current liabilities	\$ 18,756,957	\$ 14,997	\$ 18,771,954	\$ 21,155,463
Long-term liabilities				
Pension liabilities	\$ 16,124,958	-	\$ 16,124,958	\$ 16,124,958
Security deposits	64,656	-	64,656	54,689
Gift annuities, net of current portion	5,717,746	-	5,717,746	5,409,301
Total liabilities	\$ 40,664,317	\$ 14,997	\$ 40,679,314	\$ 42,744,411
Net assets				
Without donor restrictions				
Undesignated	\$ 47,137,787	\$ (9,885,181)	\$ 37,252,606	\$ 33,787,846
Designated by the Board for Operating Reserve	19,214,472	-	19,214,472	18,000,000
Designated by the Board for Endowment Fund	7,216,319	-	7,216,319	3,738,315
Total without donor restrictions	\$ 73,568,578	\$ (9,885,181)	\$ 63,683,397	\$ 55,526,161
With donor restrictions				
Purpose restrictions	\$ 21,965,212	-	\$ 21,965,212	\$ 16,494,762
Perpetual in nature	2,465,395	-	2,465,395	2,371,380
Total with donor restrictions	\$ 24,430,607	-	\$ 24,430,607	\$ 18,866,142
Total net assets	\$ 97,999,185	\$ (9,885,181)	\$ 88,114,004	\$ 74,392,303
Total liabilities and net assets	\$ 138,663,502	\$ (9,870,184)	\$ 128,793,318	\$ 117,136,714

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

Combined statements of activities
Generally Accepted Accounting Principles presentation
10 months ended February 28, 2021, and fiscal year ended April 30, 2020

	Combined total			
	Without donor restrictions	With donor restrictions	February 2021 unaudited	April 2020 audited
Changes in unrestricted net assets				
Revenues				
Contributions	\$ 28,396,150	\$ 9,126,116	\$ 37,522,266	\$ 42,409,059
Estate bequests	1,278,426	-	1,278,426	1,574,911
Investment income	2,344,928	-	2,344,928	2,589,292
Bahá'í school tuition	126,071	-	126,071	865,356
Sale of books and special materials	429,877	-	429,877	918,591
Other income	943,334	-	943,334	1,963,115
Unrealized gain (loss) on investments	7,879,061	-	7,879,061	(1,492,785)
Net assets released from restriction	3,213,258	(3,213,258)	-	-
Unrealized gain on Perpetual Trust	94,015	-	94,015	33,546
Total revenues	\$ 44,705,120	\$ 5,912,858	\$ 50,617,978	\$ 48,861,085
Expenses				
Education and teaching	\$ 10,734,002	-	\$ 10,734,002	\$ 16,218,792
Community services	4,542,641	-	4,542,641	5,207,729
Publishing and communications	4,973,101	-	4,973,101	6,273,110
Contributions to other organizations	4,298,473	-	4,298,473	2,113,132
General management and administration	5,931,396	-	5,931,396	6,861,804
Properties management	3,939,855	-	3,939,855	4,320,340
Information technology	2,476,810	-	2,476,810	2,924,922
Total expenses	\$ 36,896,278	-	\$ 36,896,278	\$ 43,919,829
Changes in net assets before pension adjustment	\$ 7,808,842	\$ 5,912,858	\$ 13,721,700	\$ 4,941,256
Non-operating:				
Net periodic pension benefit cost	-	-	-	\$ 849,563
Pension charges other than net periodic benefit cost	-	-	-	4,535,863
				\$ 5,385,426
Increase/(decrease) in net assets	\$ 7,808,842	\$ 5,912,858	\$ 13,721,700	\$ (444,170)
Net assets, beginning of year	\$ 55,526,161	\$ 18,866,142	\$ 74,392,303	\$ 74,836,473
Net assets, end of year	\$ 63,335,003	\$ 24,779,000	\$ 88,114,003	\$ 74,392,303

Notes to financial statements

February 28, 2021, and April 30, 2020

Operations and accounting policies

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

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

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

Contributions

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

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

Tax-exempt status

The US Treasury Department has held that the National Spiritual Assembly and

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

Bequests, legacies, devises, transfers, or gifts to the National Spiritual Assembly or its subordinate Local Assemblies are deductible for Federal estate and gift tax purposes as provided by IRC Sections 2055, 2106, and 2522.

Inventories

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

Investments

Investments are recorded at market value.

Property and equipment

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

Asset description	Asset life
Furniture/Equipment	3–10 years
Buildings/Improvements	5–40 years
Bahá'í House of Worship	75 years

Bosch fire loss

The Bosch Bahá'í School near Santa Cruz, California, was severely damaged by wildfires that ravaged Northern California during August and September 2020. Cleanup and reconstruction have commenced, and insurance claims have been submitted in excess of \$9 million.



Junior youth program learning sites

Learning sites for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program continued to focus on gaining insight into the movement of populations toward the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and how the program contributes to that movement.

Dozens of animators and coordinators have studied and applied practices from emerging branch-course materials that supplement Ruhi Book 5, the fundamental training course for the animators who facilitate and accompany junior youth groups. These practices are already yielding insights into how the activity and learning in the groups may be fortified. Coordinators and animators, often in association with these new materials, advanced their learning in areas that include: documenting what is learned as groups are conducted; encouraging junior youth to study the texts more attentively and gain greater understanding; sustaining youth in the path of service, both as animators and in their lives going forward; engaging entire families in the process of spiritual and social transformation; and strengthening the program's schemes of coordination.

The Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Center oversees a global network of sites for generating and disseminating learning about the junior youth program, each of which collaborates with the Regional Training Institute in its own region and, in some cases, in nearby regions. This past year, learning sites were based in these five US clusters:

- Metro Atlanta, Georgia
- Dallas City, Texas
- East Valley (south suburban Phoenix), Arizona
- San Diego, California
- Triangle (Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area), North Carolina

In addition, learning sites in Vancouver, British Columbia, and Toronto, Ontario, collaborate with some of the training institutes in the United States.

The learning sites' resource persons, the training institutes, cluster and subregional junior youth program coordinators, and other collaborators facilitate learning through regional and cluster-level reflection spaces, accompaniment of coordinators and animators within clusters and neighborhoods, and participation in such activities as teaching projects and youth and junior youth camps.

Naturally, activities at all levels in 2020–21 had to be adapted to restrictions stemming from the pandemic. Many groups, camps, and larger reflection spaces moved to online videoconferences. Sleepover camps were curtailed, as were outreaches to public schools, which have often been useful in identifying those receptive to serving and participating. Many animators adapted in part by relying more heavily on in-person or virtual home visits with individual participants. Some gatherings were possible with social distancing observed, especially in warm-weather regions—such as a successful youth camp in Metro Atlanta and resumed group meetings in a Phoenix neighborhood. All involved have concentrated on learning what adaptive practices may be valuable to continue once restrictions are lifted.

Among other learning over the past year:

Documenting what is learned

The practice of animators keeping notebook journals is one of the results from study of the new branch courses that has had the most impact. The Triangle site notes that when such journaling is done regularly as part of junior youth group meetings, animators pay closer attention to incorporating every dimension

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The journaling practice in the Navajo Nation's Houck/Sanders area is helping the friends gain a clearer understanding of progress and challenges in general, including the flow of conversations with junior youth, the quality of connections with families, the emergence of pockets of activity, the interconnection of various activities, and what support may be needed within the community related to the pandemic.

of the program into their groups' activities; keep better track of how individual participants express their understanding of the concepts in the texts (including improvements in language proficiency); and contribute more effectively during reflection with coordinators and with other neighborhood animators. The East Valley site additionally notes that the journaling practice in the Navajo Nation's Houck/Sanders area is helping the friends gain a clearer understanding of progress and challenges in general, including the flow of conversations with junior youth, the quality of connections with families, the emergence of pockets of activity, the interconnection of various activities, and what support may be needed within the community related to the pandemic. Coordinators, in their turn, have gained strength in their accompaniment of the animators and can better track which junior youths have completed which texts. This helps in assessment of how well prepared they are to enter the main sequence of courses at the proper age.

Fostering junior youths' understanding of the texts

A serendipitous development during the pandemic has come from an increase in conversations with one junior youth at a time focused on the content of the texts. Animators in several regions observe that participants comprehend and express key concepts more effectively when the texts are at the heart of these conversations, whether by phone, on the Internet, or conducted across front doors with appropriate social distancing. The Dallas site reports improvements in the rate of junior youths completing the texts, and in the Triangle many animators are gaining greater insights into how participants become attracted enough to the concepts to begin incorporating spiritual concepts in their lives.

The East Valley site states further that some are more deeply exploring how to apply the ideas practically. Next steps in learning include how the strengths of individual conversations can complement the activities of group meetings and enhance conversations leading to tangible service in the community.

Accompanying youth in a path of service

Refining and intensifying accompaniment has become a central topic in the effort to support young animators in an atmosphere of love and trust—not only in sustaining their commitment to their indispensable role in the junior youth program and helping them deepen their familiarity with the junior youth texts, but also in growing as protagonists in their own and their communities' continual transformation. Aware of the pressures and time demands that youth face in our society, the San Diego site aims for weekly conversations that touch on well-being and on spiritual and practical principles, in the context of their service and activity. The East Valley site has focused learning on small steps young people can take on a path that leads to accompanying others into the field of service. Part of this is the capacity to encourage junior youths themselves to contribute to the groups' growth. The Dallas cluster, where the program has grown to encompass 20 groups with 15 animators, holds weekly institute study spaces and regular animator and tutor reflections, and creates opportunities for home visits and participation in Holy Days and other gatherings. Young people there can also be assisted with homework and college applications. It was noted that youths who previously graduated from the junior youth program are lending great effort to these developments. And East Valley echoes a concern expressed by various sites that this accompaniment sometimes means

simply showing love and providing support when youths face challenges at home or school, discussing possibilities for earning money, and gaining deep appreciation of the importance of paying attention to each individual soul.

The Metro Atlanta site is renewing its exploration of seeking young people in the general population willing to serve as animators. Informed by guidance from the International Teaching Center, that exploration deals with the nature and depth of conversations conducted with youth and families, the spiritual qualities and attitudes those conversations require, how to recognize capacity in others, how to extend the conversation to an entire neighborhood, and the implications for accompaniment of youth. A summer youth camp in the Indian Creek neighborhood was one source of learning in that quest, as conversations with people in the sphere of a junior youth group launched in 2018—many centered on the betterment of society through Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—led 16 youths, mostly friends of the Faith, to accept invitations into institute training. Study of several Ruhi books in that socially distanced outdoor camp helped propel the formation of two new junior youth groups and a children's class supported by those youths.

The Triangle site adds that the branch-course materials deal with fundamental elements of implementing the junior youth program in a neighborhood. They are learning about a process in which veteran animators share experiences with newer ones, lending encouragement to all.

Engaging entire families

Conversations about not only the junior youth program, but also the spiritual concepts underpinning the community-building process, are being extended

to entire families, often through home visits. These touch on such topics as daily prayer and reading from the Bahá'í writings, the twofold purpose of acting to transform oneself and society, walking a path of service, and the spiritual nature of human identity. The Atlanta site notes that the relationships being built are helping the families as a whole become collaborators in efforts to sustain and grow the program, especially in the effort to attract more young people to be trained as animators and tutors. In San Diego, animators are being encouraged to host family celebrations when junior youths complete a text, giving the young people opportunities to discuss concepts they have learned with their parents—and providing parents in turn with more opportunities to be involved in the young people's education.

Schemes of coordination

Established activities to coordinate and accompany individuals in learning are being augmented in the Triangle cluster, as experiences with junior youth groups are being shared systematically with parents new to the Bahá'í community in an effort to encourage more families to help grow the program within young people's circles of friends. Teams consisting of animators and parents of junior youth program graduates have been formed to carry out this accompaniment, and collaboration with Spiritual Assemblies and the Area Teaching Committee has been vital. The Dallas cluster, gaining experience in ensuring continuity at a higher level, is allowing several months for the outgoing junior youth coordinator to accompany the newly appointed one. The incoming coordinator has already gained experience through involvement in youth camps, visits to animators and groups, reviews of the texts, and animator gatherings.

The Metro Atlanta site is renewing its exploration of seeking young people in the general population willing to serve as animators. That exploration deals with the nature and depth of conversations conducted with youth and families, the spiritual qualities and attitudes those conversations require, how to recognize capacity in others, how to extend the conversation to an entire neighborhood, and the implications for accompaniment of youth.

Because of the pandemic, the Desk participated in a wide variety of virtual gatherings and occasions held at every level from neighborhoods to clusters to regions to the nation and continent. Both the conversations that ensued and analysis of data allowed for the Desk to prepare a variety of reports for the National Assembly and Continental Counselors.

Learning Desk

The National Spiritual Assembly established the Learning Desk in October 2013 to assist it in systematically following progress across the country in pursuit of the objectives of the Five Year Plan, and to aid it in supporting and strengthening learning about expansion and consolidation at the national and regional levels.

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

The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

During 2020–21, the Desk continued to organize its work around three primary objectives:

- Providing the National Spiritual Assembly with cogent analysis of the process of expansion and consolidation in progress across the country.
- Contributing to the enhancement of a national learning process in which experience and insights can be shared across regions, particularly with respect to training institutes and the movement of clusters.
- Offering what the Desk is seeing

across the country as an assistance to the efforts of other offices at the Bahá'í National Center.

Because of the pandemic, the Desk participated in a wide variety of virtual gatherings and occasions held at every level from neighborhoods to clusters to regions to the nation and continent. Both the conversations that ensued and analysis of data allowed for the Desk to prepare a variety of reports for the National Assembly and Continental Counselors. Below are some examples:

- Two Cycle Reports, providing the National Assembly with brief updates every six months on the progress of the Plan
- An overview analysis of advances possible during the Plan's duration
- An overview on advancing the process of entry by troops in the United States from 1996 to 2021
- Summary of a continental gathering focused on advancing the frontiers in centers of intense activity (led by the Canadian Learning Desk and the Counselors)

National Statistics Office

Eighteen months after the launch of the online version of the Statistical Report Program (SRP) within the United States, momentum in its usage is rising. More than 30 national communities around the world now have real-time access to the application, and capacity is being built everywhere in efforts to fortify the flow of information, engage in analysis and planning, and improve the accuracy of cluster statistics.

Enhancing the capacity for learning

As the Bahá'í community across the United States strives to advance the process of entry by troops, an essential element of its growing culture of learning is the sharing of what has been learned. Progress in this sharing of learning is evident among all the Plan's protagonists, whether individual, community, or institutional, as reported within SRP.

At the grass roots, commitment to the entire process of learning has expanded among all who are contributing to the community-building work fueling growth. Progress is being shared in virtual spaces for reflection and planning created at regional, subregional, cluster, and other levels—for example, reflection and inter-institutional gatherings, and teaching conferences. As insights are drawn from this sharing, quantifiable information is captured and entered into SRP by Area Teaching Committees, Regional Training Institutes, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and, as needed, Auxiliary Board members or their assistants. In centers of intense activity, such as neighborhoods or villages, progress reports come directly from those working within the Plan's framework, and each

center is given the attention it requires to fortify the community's progress. An instrument designed by the Bahá'í World Center, SRP assists institutions and agencies at all levels of the community, particularly at the level of the cluster, in planning for growth, obtaining an accurate assessment of the development, and sharing learning at all levels.

At the national and regional levels, work is advancing to strengthen the continuous flow of information across clusters and regions to assist with intensifying the progress of growth. With the National Statistics Office's collaboration, Auxiliary Board members, Regional Bahá'í Councils, and cluster agencies cultivate the conditions necessary for sharing both narrative and quantifiable progress with communities of Bahá'ís and friends of the Faith. Regions and subregional groupings look to communities of proven strength to help those in clusters where less experience has accrued. Efforts continue toward drawing on untapped resources and overcoming any obstacles to the flow of information needed to meet the demands of intensive growth.

Utilization of data expands our vision

In a 2016 letter to an individual believer, the Universal House of Justice offered the following explanation:

In general, the statistical information collected at the level of the cluster is primarily intended to facilitate local analysis and planning. Therefore, it is important for the friends and especially the agencies guiding the efforts at the cluster level to strive to understand

In centers of intense activity, such as neighborhoods or villages, progress reports come into the Statistical Report Program directly from those working within the Plan's framework, and each center is given the attention it requires to fortify the community's progress.

In the year 2020–21, a significant rise has been observed in these capacities within regions and clusters: to collect data, to report that data in a way that widens the vision of what can be achieved, and to make decisions that facilitate development.



the nature of the work called for by the House of Justice in the Five Year Plan and how the gathering of statistical information will inform reflection on action and assist in revising and improving approaches in cycle after cycle.

This and other guidance provided in recent years by the House of Justice has helped expand the community's understanding of how statistics—through accurate gathering and careful analysis—are fundamental to the work of many institutions and agencies in supporting growth. In the year 2020–21, a significant rise has been observed in these capacities within regions and clusters: to collect data, to report that data in a way that widens the vision of what can be achieved, and to make decisions that facilitate development. With these capacities strengthened, the friends at the neighborhood, cluster, and subregional levels are more readily identifying:

- strengths to be built upon and weaknesses to overcome
- highlights of progress
- patterns of growth in areas of intense activity

In turn, these strengths facilitate the setting of goals for intensive activity.

Experience in this Five Year Plan reinforces the key principle that conscientiously gathered and accurate statistics are an essential element in reflecting current conditions in each region, sub-region, cluster, or neighborhood, even if those statistics show lack of progress for a time. When the agencies and the friends within each cluster clearly understand these conditions, regional and national agencies are in turn better equipped to determine what types of support and resources are required to meet challenges.

To learn more, contact the National Statistics Officer (at NSO@usbnc.org).

Office of International Pioneering

For more than a century, the Bahá'ís of North America were at the forefront of the worldwide spread of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. From those who earned imperishable fame as “Knights of Bahá'u'lláh” during the beloved Guardian’s Ten Year World Crusade to the thousands of believers who left their homes during other decades and other Plans to pioneer abroad, the American Bahá'í community admirably and selflessly answered the Master’s call to carry the unifying message of Bahá'u'lláh to the far corners of the earth.

In a letter dated March 26, 2016, the Universal House of Justice clarified that while the past contributions of North American believers to the spread of our Faith in the world cannot be underestimated, “[t]he tasks confronting [the friends in North America] are not identical with those of an earlier age. With the international spread of the Faith largely concluded, demands on you are now most pressing on the home front.” While more than 1,300 American Bahá'ís still serve abroad, the vast amount of work formerly coordinated by the Office of International Pioneering has greatly diminished in recent years and has been integrated into the Secretariat.

The House of Justice has not assigned any international pioneering goals to the American Bahá'í community, and in a message dated April 20, 2018, the National Spiritual Assembly issued a call for homefront pioneers who could contribute to the national goal of achieving 625 intensive programs of growth by Riqḍán 2021. Since that call, some 437 individuals have deployed within our national Bahá'í community to serve in this capacity, while 34 relocated to serve as overseas pioneers.

Notwithstanding these developments, Bahá'ís who express a desire to live and serve overseas are free to pursue any opportunities that may be open to them, based on their language abilities, professional skills, or personal contacts. The Secretariat offers support to these friends by maintaining a list of international service opportunities (made known to it by other National Spiritual Assemblies), and by providing letters of introduction to the national communities to which they are relocating. By serving as a point of contact, the Secretariat continues to assist those who have chosen to leave this community to contribute to the international development of the Faith.

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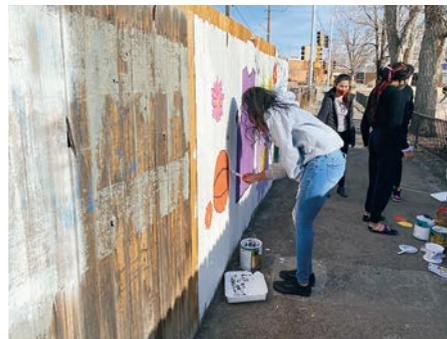
As friends study the contents of Ruhi Book 13, *Engaging in Social Action*, they begin to more readily recognize the range of their own experience with social action at the cluster level, a fundamental capacity for making a contribution. They also acquire a better appreciation for the coherence that the Five Year Plan's framework for action lends to all areas of endeavor.

Social Action Desk

The work of the Social Action Desk, an agency of the National Spiritual Assembly, has fallen primarily in three areas since it was formed in 2010: raising consciousness about the nature of the Bahá'í community's involvement in social action; building capacity at the cluster level to systematically learn about this area of activity; and ascertaining the conditions and elements associated with the timely emergence of sustained social action initiatives and programs.

Consciousness raising

The Social Action Desk in 2020 reoriented and systematized its work to raise consciousness after the Ruhi Institute released two units of its Book 13: *Engaging in Social Action*. As friends study the book's contents, they begin to more readily recognize the range of their own experience with social action at the cluster level, a fundamental capacity for making a contribution. They also acquire a better appreciation for the coherence that the Five Year Plan's framework for action lends to all areas of endeavor. The Desk, alongside the Regional Training Institutes, is learning about the dissemination of this course across regions and the ways participants are applying insights from their study. As those serving regional and local institutions and agencies study the first two units of Book 13, reflection spaces previously dedicated to expansion and consolidation begin to widen in scope and include conversations about the modest contributions friends are making toward improving the material and social lives of their communities.



Capacity building

The Desk has been gathering numerous anecdotes as Bahá'ís endeavor to read reality and take appropriate action alongside their neighbors. The friends' collective efforts to mitigate suffering caused by the global pandemic and respond creatively to a renewed national sensitivity to racism builds their capacity to involve larger numbers of families in all aspects of their work. True to the framework of the Plan, an understanding of humanity's inherent oneness and a shared belief in the capacity of all to contribute permeates these efforts; those "in need" take an active role in consultation, unified action, and regular reflection.

Through such means as phone networks, "porch visits," and gatherings for devotions and consultation—whether online or safely in person—humanity's pressing challenges are being met through unified action. Conversations about protecting the most vulnerable and fostering collective well-being have led to myriad efforts. These include the delivery to neighbors of care packages with information about resources, health knowledge, and inspiring quotations; elaborate grocery delivery networks for the elderly established during an extended lockdown; academic initiatives online and safely in person to assist young

people with their studies; coordination with local school food delivery systems to ensure lunches reach dozens of families who would otherwise fall through the cracks; community gardens and the sharing of vegetables and fruit tree saplings among families; mask-making; and countless others.

As the friends take into consideration both the spiritual and the material aspects of community life, certain insights emerge:

- Where gatherings for worship and consultation among groups of families in close proximity have been sustained for some time, social action efforts acquire a pronounced collective dimension.
- The capacity built through hosting longer institute camps and expansion efforts assists many to sustain intense service for several weeks in their relief efforts.
- Where forming a shared reading of reality is a frequent habit of families and local institutions at the grass



roots, the friends can draw upon diverse talents and match resources with the parts of the community where they would do the most good.

Programs and organizations

The Desk conducted its annual survey of the national landscape of social action initiatives and again found that the vast majority were activities of fixed duration (i.e., they naturally came to a close when their objective, whether small or large, had been met). In addition, the Desk found that a hundred or so initiatives have been sustained for some years. Among these are agencies that consciously learn to apply elements of the Bahá'í revelation and, in this way, become increasingly coherent with the overall framework for action. This year in particular, some agencies and projects had to expand their endeavors to address needs exposed by the pandemic and are beginning to offer insights from the Bahá'í conceptual framework to collaborating institutions from the larger society.



Where gatherings for worship and consultation among groups of families in close proximity have been sustained for some time, social action efforts acquire a pronounced collective dimension.



Office of Assembly Development

The Office of Assembly Development provides institutional support to Local Spiritual Assemblies as they learn to build vibrant, thriving Bahá'í communities. The Office approaches its work as a form of accompaniment, joining Assemblies as they advance along a continuum of growth and development described in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

In collaboration with members of the Auxiliary Boards, Regional Bahá'í Councils, the Office of Community Administration, and other offices and agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly, the Office focuses on what Spiritual Assemblies are learning about the following vital capacities:

- Building consciousness of their institutional responsibilities in the advancement of the Cause.
- Strengthening their commitment to and promotion of the Five Year Plans' framework for action.
- Advancing their understanding of the relationships to be forged among the Plans' three protagonists: the individual, institutions, and communities.
- Fostering and promoting the community's spiritual health.
- Developing systems to address the increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements of an expanding community.

Regional and cluster-level gatherings

As a result of the pandemic, during 2020–21 the Office learned to rely on online gatherings to carry out its primary task of supporting the development

of Local Spiritual Assemblies. In one instance, members of Auxiliary Boards requested a gathering for assistants residing in four states. In another, a Regional Council adapted study materials for use with all of the Assemblies in its region. The Office also gathered online with 22 new and first-time Assemblies, shortly after Riḍván.

Strengthening administrative systems

In one successful endeavor, the Office assisted a Spiritual Assembly to study guidance related to one of its administrative systems (e.g., treasury system, communication system, properties system), examine its current situation, and develop a plan to strengthen its functioning. That Assembly—the only one in its cluster—appointed a working group that consisted of two of its officers and a supporting team, who were accompanied by an Auxiliary Board member and an Office representative. Meeting weekly for several months, the working group studied relevant guidance and reflected on experience in light of it. Eventually it presented an outline of a plan to the Assembly and humbly sought its comments. Drawing on that input, it then prepared a proposal, leaving it for the Assembly to finalize in consultation with Auxiliary Board members.

The Assembly noted that it had not previously experienced a relationship like the one it had with the working group: that is, a relationship characterized by empowerment and collaboration. The working group sincerely wanted to carry out the Assembly's guidance on its plan, while the Assembly was grateful for the working group's efforts.

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In one online gathering, members of Auxiliary Boards requested a gathering for assistants residing in four states. In another, a Regional Council adapted study materials for use with all of the Assemblies in its region. The Office also gathered online with 22 new and first-time Assemblies, shortly after Riḍván.

Recognizing how important it is for Assemblies to be systematic and coherent in their approach to translating into action guidance available in *Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies: Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities* (GLSA), an extensive review of each its chapters is underway.

Assembly members universally acknowledged a sense of ownership of the plan, and emerged with a greater appreciation for the value of a shared understanding and common vision. This realization encouraged further reflection about the necessity of plans and vision for other areas of administrative activity. Taking gradual steps toward strengthening the administrative system, rather than addressing every area of interest at once, allowed the Assembly to more effectively consult about the matter and implement the plan. The Assembly concluded that handling matters gradually could be a worthwhile approach in many areas.

Assessment of spiritual health

In collaboration with the Office, work is underway to assess ways in which Assemblies are thinking about their role in fostering and promoting thriving communities. A survey is being piloted among a small group of Assemblies and, after review, will be expanded to include all Assemblies in the coming year.

Online resources for Local Spiritual Assemblies

Recognizing how important it is for Assemblies to be systematic and coherent in their approach to translating into action guidance available in [*Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies: Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*](#) (GLSA), an extensive review of each of its chapters is underway. Each chapter endeavors to present a foundational understanding of the subject matter's nature and purpose, the Assembly's responsibilities to the individual and the community, and relevant policies and procedures. Updating chapters with new guidance helps ensure that this valuable resource continues to be attuned to changing needs.

Emerging Insights is a publication created to gather and disseminate insights

from Local Spiritual Assemblies across the United States as they advance. This year, the Office made available online Persian translations for three published issues. Work continues on the next issue, which will focus on the nature of relationships that local Assemblies help to forge between the Faith's institutions and agencies.

Special Visit program

The Special Visit program, in which selected Assemblies convene for two and a half days of study, consultation, and reflection in the environs of the Bahá'í House of Worship, usually held in March, July, and October, was suspended this year due to the global health crisis.

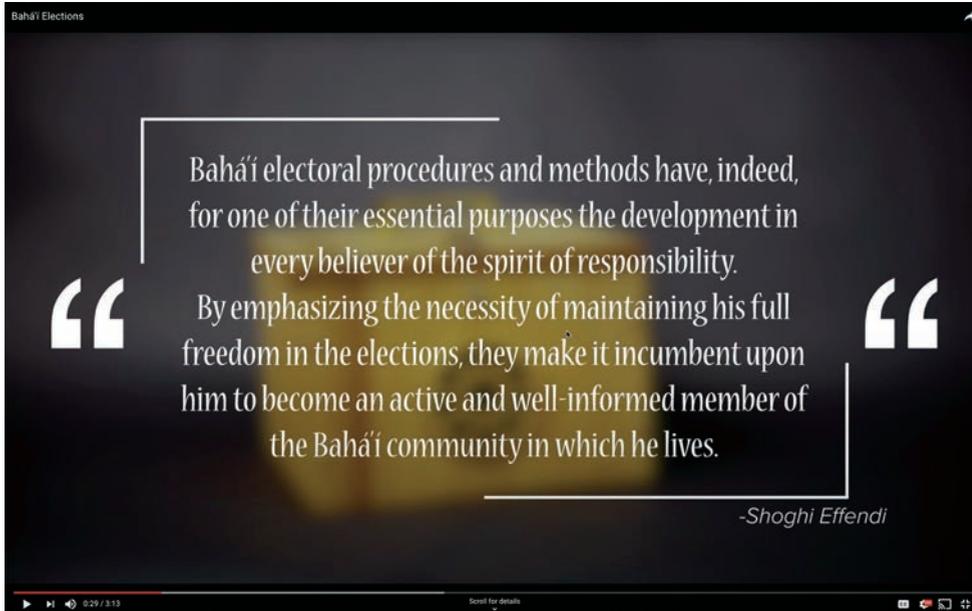
Comments from online gatherings

Below are a few reflections from participants in some of the 12 online gatherings conducted this year by the Office of Assembly Development:

"Compared to what we actually do, these studies felt like putting the ship aright. As an Assembly, we need to focus on the Plan's framework and create our own unified vision within it."

"I gained a deeper insight [into] the Assembly's role in supporting the community in their individual initiatives to carry out teaching efforts and was reminded of the many resources available to us from the institutions."

"We realized as an Assembly that when we have a broader vision that we can then share with the community, it's up to the community to act on it; not that we dictate people's actions and tell them to have the vision."



The Office approaches its work as a form of accompaniment, joining Assemblies as they advance along a continuum of growth and development described in the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.



Office of Community Administration

During 2020–21, the Office presented 90 agenda items for National Assembly meetings. Among these items, 71 involved circumstances of individuals—such as questions on Bahá’í administrative status, exceptions to the law of parental consent for marriage, and other issues.

The Office of Community Administration handles a wide variety of administrative matters, with its primary work on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly falling into two broad areas: the administration of Bahá’í law and the effort to learn, alongside Bahá’ís and their institutions, how to foster individual and collective spiritual health.

Day-to-day administrative work

Most situations that involve the Office originate from contacts with Local Spiritual Assemblies. The Office typically works with local Assemblies by providing guidance specific to a situation based on established guidance and National Spiritual Assembly policies; offering suggestions based on the same guidance for the resolution of issues, thus obviating the need for the intervention of the National Assembly; and requests for additional information as needed, if a decision by the National Assembly appears to be required.

Each Riḍván, the Office assists communities where difficulties have arisen in relation to the election of a Local Spiritual Assembly. On average, this involves 70 to 100 individual instances in which some issue prevents a local Assembly from being immediately recognized following election. Many of these issues can be resolved without the intervention of the National Assembly. This year was unusual given that Local Spiritual Assembly elections were carried out without in-person annual meetings. The Office was involved in consultations to prepare election guidance issued in advance of Riḍván, and remained

involved to help address questions that arose from the elections.

A portion of the daily administrative work of the Office requires interacting with believers and Local Spiritual Assemblies to gather information—then organizing and compiling relevant facts and summarizing the information for the National Assembly’s review. During 2020–21, the Office presented 90 agenda items for National Assembly meetings. Among these items, 71 involved circumstances of individuals—such as questions on Bahá’í administrative status, exceptions to the law of parental consent for marriage, and other issues. Questions related to the functioning of specific Local Spiritual Assemblies or general questions related to the administration of Bahá’í law were also presented for the National Spiritual Assembly’s review.

Once the National Assembly makes decisions on these matters, the Office of Community Administration is responsible for implementing them through collaboration with national, regional, and local agencies, the coordination of any administrative changes, and the development of necessary correspondence.

In the course of its work, the Office engages in a significant volume of correspondence on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly. During the past year approximately 1,600 responses were required from the Office to individuals and agencies across the country and internationally.



An unprecedented year

During this unprecedented year, Office members worked almost entirely from home. This required significant adjustments to ensure that the vital collaboration between members of the staff, which normally takes place through in-person interaction at the Bahá'í National Center, could continue undiminished. One benefit developing out of these unusual circumstances is a new and noticeable ability in the general population of the country to participate in remote/virtual meetings. Opportunities for members of staff opened up to better consult about complex issues with individuals and local Assembly representatives as needed. It has also increased the ease with which a consultation among the staff can quickly be extended to a collaborator outside the Bahá'í National Center.

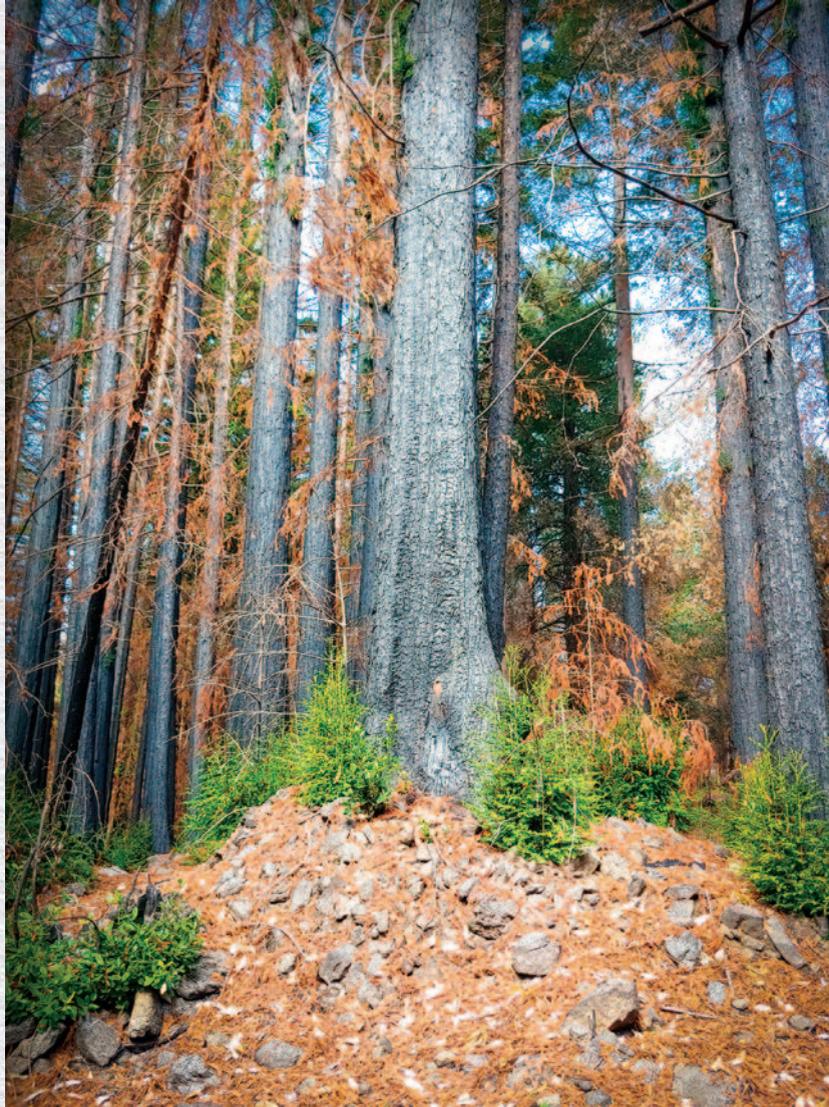
Collaboration with other Assembly offices and agencies

The Office has continued to pursue opportunities with the Office of Assembly

Development and collaborators in the field to support the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and to learn about fostering spiritual health at the local level. There are, in addition, several other areas of learning that the Office pursues, including the following four:

- Identifying, supporting, and coordinating the work of special representatives in the field who can assist from time to time, either with circumstances that exceed the capacity of local institutions or to help reinforce their functioning through continuing accompaniment.
- Collaborating with experienced individuals and agencies to support those facing significant challenges involving such issues as mental health, trauma, family violence, sexuality, and gender identity.
- Accompanying those believers who have lost their administrative privileges and those communities that are affected by this.
- Learning, alongside Local Spiritual Assemblies, about “[h]ow to help the believers to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations, and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standards of justice.”

One benefit developing out of these unusual circumstances is a new and noticeable ability in the general population of the country to participate in remote/virtual meetings. Opportunities for members of staff opened up to better consult about complex issues with individuals and local Assembly representatives as needed.



Office of Education and Schools

In adapting to the global pandemic, the Office of Education and Schools (OES) had to rethink its methods and approaches to programming and outreach, even as it continued striving in this final year of the Five Year Plan to learn about fulfilling its learning objectives ever more effectively.

2020–21 witnessed the temporary closure of facilities for three permanent centers of learning, as well as the suspension of in-person seasonal school sessions across the continent. This Office then faced two key questions:

- How can the Office utilize both spiritual and technical resources to bring online distance learning to life, drawing particularly on the experience of the Wilmette Institute as an educational portal?
- How can virtual learning spaces build capacity and understanding, as well as foster upliftment and transformation?

Both to strengthen the programs offered through traditional avenues and to explore new spheres of service, the various divisions of OES have been widening their collaboration with individuals, institutions, and communities in working toward the goals of the Plan. Vital to this effort is a continued engagement with families and agencies in the schools' service areas, in the realms of expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in discourses. The reports on the following pages detail a few selected endeavors, in the spirit of

reflecting on a wealth of insights and observations from this learning activity.

Difficulty gathering statistics

Closure of the permanent schools' facilities and the moving of all programs online has disrupted the traditional statistical picture of their operations, which largely has focused on how the physical spaces are used during the year. As this effort is being rethought, Green Acre is the first to generate a report of activities since spring 2020 (*see table on page 123*), with a new model that reflects both interactive events, conducted via Zoom, and video programs that can be accessed anytime on its website.

A significant barrier to gathering consistent statistics on school participation arose when the use of Cvent, an online registration system, was suspended. This action was taken because registration fees and lodging reservations were discontinued as the permanent and seasonal schools went online. Cvent had been used to capture data on the numbers of participants in each school, as well as the percentage of participants who are friends of the Faith.

Volunteer clearance

During the pandemic, OES approved more than 1,335 people who had been recommended as program presenters or facilitators. Use of the online application Sterling Volunteers allowed for an efficient clearance process for those teaching and/or working with minors, as 736 such volunteers were approved from May 2020 through February 2021.

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The various divisions of the Office of Education and Schools have been widening their collaboration with individuals, institutions, and communities in working toward the goals of the Plan. Vital to this effort is a continued engagement with families and agencies in the schools' service areas, in the realms of expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in discourses.

Since August, electric lines have been replaced, dead trees and hanging branches dangerous to roads and buildings have been removed, and burnt remnants and ash from lost buildings have been cleaned up and disposed of off campus. Smoke damage in remaining buildings is being addressed, and the water system is in the process of being restored and repaired at the time of this report. A safe and effective reconstruction of the campus is yet to be started; it may take up to two years to gain the needed permits and approvals.



Bosch Bahá'í School, Santa Cruz, California

By Naw-Rúz 2020, [Bosch](#) was in lockdown and all onsite programs were canceled due to COVID-19. Staff members began the year working from home and explored how programs could be conducted online. They started hosting a weekly virtual devotional gathering and a six-week program on the study of the writings of the Báb. They conducted training sessions with a few teams on materials from the program “Walking Together on a Path Towards Race Unity and Oneness (Part 2),” and began regularly accompanying families in a nearby reservoir cluster. Then they encountered another unexpected, historic phenomenon.

In mid-August, the dry summer exposed the normally cooler, fog-banked region along the coastal Santa Cruz Mountains to unusual heat. Lightning storms brought a modicum of needed rain, but also unleashed strikes that set off wildfires, which swept the region. In the middle of the night, Bosch staff were alerted to the impending danger and safely evacuated as firefighters worked tirelessly and heroically to save lives and structures.

Although staff residences, offices, and guest gathering spaces were spared, the campus lost all its rental cabins and physical service structures. The fire also destroyed countless trees. Since

August, electric lines have been replaced, dead trees and hanging branches dangerous to roads and buildings have been removed, and burnt remnants and ash from lost buildings have been cleaned up and disposed of off campus. Smoke damage in remaining buildings is being addressed, and the water system is in the process of being restored and repaired at the





time of this report. A safe and effective reconstruction of the campus is yet to be started; it may take up to two years to gain the needed permits and approvals.

As the National Spiritual Assembly consults on plans for Bosch, staff are humbled by the sacrifice and generosity of contributions to the Properties Relief Fund for the school's restoration, as well as for the prayers felt from all over the world. As this center for learning prepares for reconstruction, its staff cannot help but stand in awe as Mother Nature also restores herself. The return of greenery and wildlife among the giant redwoods is a sign of hope and faith that Bosch will soon contribute again to what is already a spiritually inspirational place and continue to radiate the light of the unifying teachings of Bahá'u'lláh throughout the region. In the meantime, staff members at Bosch assist with the restoration process, serve in various departments in the Bahá'í National Organization, organize online programs, and walk a path of service with families in a nearby reservoir cluster.

This year, Bosch's outreach department established a strong relationship with that reservoir cluster, where consistent and regular patterns of action and learning have been in place since before the pandemic began. Naturally, home visits, study circles, and other activities

continued virtually. The systematic pattern of learning with families actually strengthened due to the shared effects of the crisis. The desire to support each other in new ways led to more regular consultation on needs arising from the current reality, and decisions were followed by action.

This soon developed into planning for a socially distanced outdoor day camp with families and friends. Youth already active in the institute process learned to facilitate the material on race unity and were eager to build their capacity to participate in discourses through the lens of community building with their families. It became clear that when an entire family takes part in the community-building process, family members who start out less engaged begin naturally to take ownership of their own participation and their capacity to invite others to join them.

Following are reflections from families after a program in which the race unity materials were studied:

"As a father I am very proud of seeing how well my son was reading and the passion he expressed when he shared. This was very helpful for me because we don't usually have conversations on racism, and I was happy to be able to share with my son my thoughts about racism and the importance of unity. Also as a father, we often don't get to play together as we did in the camp. I think I had more fun than my son. I felt I was a junior youth again!"

"Las mamás comentaron que amar a las personas es muy sencillo, pero los prejuicios ponen paredes a ese amor. Este devocional nos ayuda a eliminar estas paredes." (The moms commented that loving people is very simple, but prejudices put up walls on that love. This devotional helps us remove these walls.)

The systematic pattern of learning with families actually strengthened due to the shared effects of the crisis. The desire to support each other in new ways led to more regular consultation on needs arising from the current reality, and decisions were followed by action.



Green Acre Bahá'í School, Eliot, Maine

Efforts regarding the discourse on race and the oneness of humanity accelerated this year as awareness of racial injustice increased across the country.

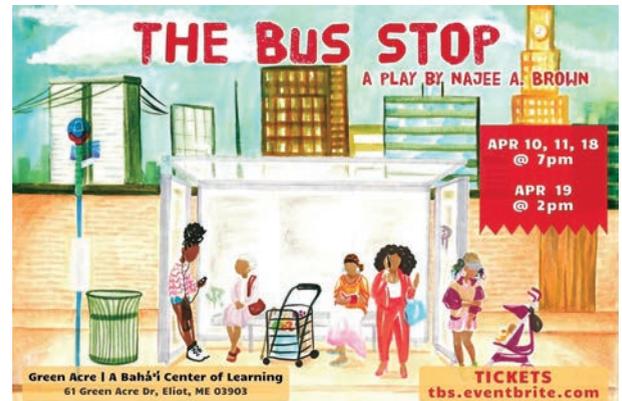
The challenging conditions of the global pandemic forced the Green Acre team to creatively shift from its primary focus on in-person gatherings to exploring key concepts of the Faith through online gatherings, webinars, and videos. This resulted in an increase in the number of participants in Green Acre programs from roughly 3,100 to 4,100. The proportion coming from the larger community rose from 19 to 27 percent (more details in the table on [page 123](#)).

Because of increased unity of thought among team members—developed through regular study, more effective consultation, taking action together to reach out to the wider community, and periodic reflection—the obstacles and limitations imposed by the pandemic were overcome in a variety of innovative and creative ways. Everyone on the team developed new capacities to serve the community and participants in the programming.

Efforts regarding the discourse on race and the oneness of humanity accelerated this year as awareness of racial injustice increased across the country. Guided by letters from the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly, the team seized opportunities to engage others by:

- Using the theater arts to bring conversations to local high schools.
- Opening dialogue with the Eliot Police Department and the Rockingham County Attorney's Office.
- Producing two art shows.
- Creating numerous dialogue spaces.

The team formed friendships, built relationships, and worked together with new friends to explore the theme of the oneness of humanity in a variety of settings. They presented concepts from the Faith directly, used



quotations from recent guidance, and employed an approach of study, consultation, and action.

The arts permeated every aspect of Green Acre's activities. The team produced two online art series on race and the oneness of humanity that featured works of visual and performing arts. The first, "Pupil of the Eye," included an online art show; a production of the play *The Bus Stop*, which premiered at a regional theater; a series of related dialogue spaces and artist videos; and a celebration of the Black Men's Gathering, which met annually at Green Acre from 1987 to 2011.

The second, which grew out of a study of the July 22, 2020, letter from the Universal House of Justice, was titled "Just, Diverse and United—The Destiny of America" and also included an online art gallery, videos, and a series of online dialogue spaces. More than 5,000 people interacted with the two shows.

[The new Green Acre website](#) went online early in the year, reaching nearly 30,000 people. It quickly became a platform for the art shows, weekly videos and blogs, and webinars and dialogue spaces facilitated by Green Acre staff. The site also gave staff a way to engage with more people outside of their regular roles. A local woman’s devotional gathering, “Refresh & Gladden,” not only continued online during the pandemic but also gave rise to the weekly video series *Morning Refresh*, which featured 29 videos and attracted over 2,600 views. The food service team at Green Acre created a weekly blog, *Food & Fellowship*, that featured their favorite recipes. A new video series featuring voices from the community, *Song of the Spirit*, was produced along with a variety of other video offerings.

Building on the team’s unity, its learning around elevating the discourse on race, and the integration of the arts, Green Acre is developing programs that will encourage meaningful conversations with individuals and institutions in the surrounding community. Further, it seeks to invite an ever-widening swath of the local population into the Bahá’í-inspired community-building process, with a particular focus on families. The year ahead will bring more new opportunities to expand online activities while re-engaging participants with in-person learning as conditions permit.



Green Acre seeks to invite an ever-widening swath of the local population into the Bahá’í-inspired community-building process, with a particular focus on families. The year ahead will bring more new opportunities to expand online activities while re-engaging participants with in-person learning as conditions permit.



Program Types	Total programs	Video views [after date recordings]	Total attendees [active]	Attendees from wider community	Adults	Youth	Junior youth	Children
Online programs [Zoom]	45	7,543	4,044	1,091	3,289	687	62	6
Weekly programs	6	0	84	9				
Subtotals	51	7,543	4,128	1,100	3,289	687	62	6
Uploaded programs [videos]	54	11,246						
Totals	105	18,789	4,128	1,100	3,289	687	62	6

Louhelen Bahá'í School, Davison, Michigan

The new reality of operating remotely and online meant transitioning to online gatherings in collaboration with members of the larger community and with sister departments of the Bahá'í National Organization.

Amid the continuing hardships and loss experienced by friends, families, and the community as COVID-19 swept through the area, the [Louhelen](#) team turned to guidance from the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly to find ways to transform these challenges and obstacles into opportunities. The team sought to widen the inroads made in hearts and minds these past few years.

The new reality of operating remotely and online meant transitioning to online gatherings in collaboration with members of the larger community and with sister departments of the Bahá'í National Organization. Working with the Office of Human Resources and cluster and regional Bahá'í institutions, and keeping up to date with guidelines from state and federal health agencies, Louhelen was able to minimize risks to staff and participants who engaged in the school's programming.

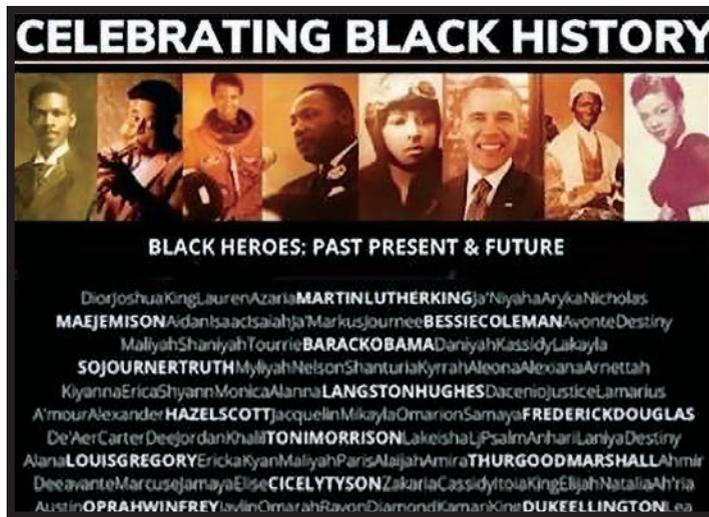
Louhelen staff gathered for weekly study, reflection, planning, and devotionals, and completed studies of Ruhi Book 4 as well as such perennially popular titles from Bahá'í literature in English as *Thief in the Night*, *Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, and *The Advent of Divine Justice*, to name a few. The staff also hosts weekly public devotionals on Tuesdays that are broadcast over Facebook.

As an example of capacity building during the pandemic, Ms. Anna Jerke, a friend of the Faith, is an active tutor, and co-hosts devotional gatherings during the week. She has worked at Louhelen in various capacities for 30 years and recently shared, "I feel like I've learned more about the Faith and

its teachings in this last year than all my previous 29 years working here." A new member of the facilities team recently declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh, and the facilities coordinator is a regular teacher for the Early Start series of children's classes. The outreach coordinator, meanwhile, resides in a house used for training institute activities in one of Flint's focus neighborhoods.

Programs that continued during the pandemic, following all Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and National Assembly guidelines, included:

- Annual Summer School Gathering (beginning 2020) with Counselor Nwandi Lawson; Mr. Ken Bowers, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly; and Regional Bahá'í Council representatives from around the country
- Summer School Series for family and friends in the Midwestern States: "Walking Together on a Path Towards Race Unity and Oneness," Parts 1 and 2 (online)
- Race Unity Facilitator Training program for the Midwestern region (online)
- Ongoing activities involving junior youth, coordinated by the Louhelen outreach coordinator
- 50 Black Fathers and Sons community forum (online)
- Early Start Children's Class, Saturday mornings (online)
- Celebration of the Arts Summer Camp Experience, with the collaboration of the Children's Theater Company and The New Standard Academy, held throughout the summer (online)



- Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration with prayers in the park (observing social distance)
- The continuing Top Talk Speaker Series (online)
- Celebration of the Arts program focused on Black history (online and observing social distance)
- Flint Parent University, an activity that has been expanding the active nucleus (online)
- Weekly live devotionals, shared via Facebook on Tuesday afternoons (online)

While all are notable, two of these programs are detailed below.

Early Start Children's Class

Grounded in the Ruhi Book 3 curriculum, Early Start Children's Class is a unique, spiritually based education program that welcomes families with children ages 2 through 5. The class began in June on Saturday mornings after parents requested online programming for children who were too young to engage in more advanced children's classes or public school programs.

Outstanding teachers and the creative use of puppets, which show direct interest in each child while delivering class lessons, make Early Start attractive to children and their families. Main characters in Early Start are Tylee, a young

African-American puppet, and Mr. C., his constant adult companion. A supporting cast of puppet characters rounds out the Early Start family, along with three additional adult volunteers who take part as teaching team members.

Nearly half the children participating are from the larger community in the cluster and across the region. Currently, 20 families are registered, and a dozen children and their parents attend regularly, representing a rich tapestry of ethnic backgrounds.

50 Black Fathers and Sons

In spring 2020 the country began to undergo a cultural shift and an outcry for racial justice, prompted by a series of killings of African Americans that exposed inequities in the criminal justice system. Louhelen responded by creating space for discourse through elevated conversation with Black fathers and their sons.

Addressing such questions as what it means to be a Black father with sons in today's social environment, participants talk about how they are coping emotionally as parents and individuals during a time when people are protesting in the hope that racial justice will be seriously addressed. They also delve into how the fathers are speaking about events to their sons and daughters, and what their hopes and dreams are for their families.

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Seasonal Bahá'í schools

Conducted entirely via Internet videoconferencing platforms, some seasonal schools were organized as a concentrated set of sessions in a weekend, while others were spread over as many as 12 days. Each continued to serve a particular state or area of the country, with small groups bringing together participants from as many localities as possible.

Social restrictions in this year of pandemic affected the reconceptualization of seasonal Bahá'í schools across the United States, and circumstances resulted in fewer programs held and significantly fewer participants than in past years. Still, the 14 sessions held in the year starting May 2020, all online, brought valuable learning about providing spaces for entire families to study and advance in service together, becoming protagonists both in their own spiritual transformation and that of society.

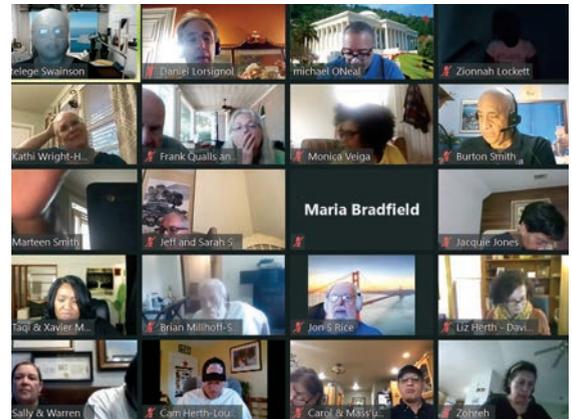
Programs overseen by seasonal schools committees across the country this year were radically different from any held since summer Bahá'í schools were instituted in the beloved Guardian's time. Conducted entirely via Internet videoconferencing platforms, some were organized as a concentrated set of sessions in a weekend, while others were spread over as many as 12 days. Each continued to serve a particular state or area of the country, with small groups bringing together participants from as many localities as possible.



Total participation can best be estimated at nearly 1,400. This determination was difficult because many households had more members participating than were formally registered, families often shared a single screen, and people moved in and out of the program as it progressed.

"Walking a Path" as families

The theme for summer, fall, and winter



schools was "Walking Together on a Path Towards Race Unity and Oneness (Part 2)," continuing a line of study begun the previous year. This year saw a greater emphasis on families participating together, rather than being divided into age groups. This emphasis emerged from experience with "Hope and the Family," a program conducted over the past few years through various permanent and seasonal Bahá'í schools. That program is structured around family camps, with entire households advancing together in their understanding of spiritual concepts and acts of service. This has been found to create enthusiasm for community building in their neighborhoods.

Thus, the 2020–21 seasonal schools invited families to increase their understanding together about healing racial prejudice as they learn in action how to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in devotional gatherings, study circles, junior youth groups, and children's classes. The program was developed to be coherent with the institute process and community-building activities. Key to the program is encouraging the emergence of a society that recognizes the nobility of all and the inherent oneness of humanity.

Leading up to each school session, families were encouraged to study the compilation “Achieving Race Unity and Advancing the Process of Entry by Troops” as well as the four letters on America and the Five Year Plan released by the National Spiritual Assembly in 2017–18.

To bring the learning process as close to the heart as possible, participants discussed case studies in the form of narratives with concrete details. One case study focused on a neighborhood devotional gathering with diverse



families whose children take part in spiritual education classes together, and participants reflected on how people can help each other see the beauty and nobility in all souls. The second case study looked at the effects of race and class prejudice on junior youths and families, and the dangers of developing an “us and them” mentality to which Bahá’ís are not immune.

Families were then organized to practice “home visits” with each other at the schools, having meaningful conversations about people who have inspired them in the arenas of service and unity building.

In the last session participants shared knowledge, resources, and challenges.

Then they made plans to meet new families in their neighborhoods and to invite them into conversations on race unity and oneness, and, as appropriate, into a path of service.

Reflection and learning

It was observed that when participants, facilitators, and school committee members contribute to a joyful and open atmosphere, conversations on difficult matters become possible and constructive. Conversations on race unity became elevated, cementing bonds of friendship and fostering hope and joy.

Among limitations found in relying completely on online programs, participants had varying degrees of comfort and familiarity with the technology, including use of breakout sessions. The use of visual arts was generally confined to sharing artworks or materials on screen. Also, many Bahá’í participants felt hindered in inviting those from the community of interest to register for the schools.

The Office of Education and Schools continues to reflect on fundamental areas of learning in the development of the seasonal schools, including how to support a community’s educational well-being, to complement the institute process, and to accompany participants in taking concrete steps toward expansion and consolidation in neighborhoods and communities.

As society moves back toward safe in-person gatherings, the Office expects that learning from the past year’s experience will inform its continued efforts to develop intimate and encouraging spaces for families to study, converse, and act together. A particular hope is to learn how to design blended online and in-person programs, to utilize the strengths of both methods.

It was observed that when participants, facilitators, and school committee members contribute to a joyful and open atmosphere, conversations on difficult matters become possible and constructive. Conversations on race unity became elevated, cementing bonds of friendship and fostering hope and joy.



Approval of the Wilmette Institute's two pending applications for accreditation could allow all interested students to enroll in the Wilmette Institute's online undergraduate and graduate courses as early as 2021–22.

Wilmette Institute

In 2020–21, the Wilmette Institute (WI) began a process of reconceptualizing its methods and approaches to complement the educational imperatives of the current Plan and to strengthen online courses. A particular focus is on working with college-age students on engaging in public discourses, with priorities guided by the Bahá'í International Community's areas of emphasis and sensitivity to issues of high importance in this country.

The new mobile-friendly website at wilmetteinstitute.org reflects two areas of concentration for the immediate future:

- Noncredit Community Learning courses, including programs for high school students.
- Credit-worthy undergraduate and graduate courses.

Accreditation

The Wilmette Institute is preparing accreditation applications to the Distance Education Accrediting Commission and the Illinois Board of Higher Education. Approval of both applications could allow all interested students to enroll in WI's online undergraduate and graduate courses as early as 2021–22.

In parallel with this, WI continues to negotiate articulation agreements with specific universities and colleges, particularly in or near clusters where capacity is being built through the institute process. Its recent agreement with the Graduate Theological Union is one such case.

Graduate Theological Union

Following a January 2020 invitation, the Wilmette Institute applied to the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in California and was accepted in October 2020 as its sixth affiliate. Immediately, for the spring semester, WI offered a graduate-level version of its course

“Anti-Black Racism in the US and Building a Unified Society” for credit through GTU's online delivery platform.

With this affiliation, WI continues to acquire experience toward full accreditation as an institution of higher education. It can offer online courses to GTU students for graduate credit and it can register its own students in the system. Students at the University of California, Berkeley (across the street from GTU) can register as well. The Institute will offer two to four courses this fall through GTU. Anyone wishing to pursue a master's or doctoral degree through GTU in religious studies, or a related field such as chaplaincy, can include a significant Bahá'í component in their study.

The WI is learning how it can offer lectures and informational displays at GTU, and how it may contribute to high-level public discourse alongside other Bahá'í institutions in the Bay Area.



Noncredit Community Learning courses

The Institute's noncredit courses attracted significantly greater participation in 2020 for several reasons: the COVID-19 pandemic; increased interest in the “Anti-Black Racism” course; and generally higher awareness of the Institute stimulated by its webinars.

In 2020, WI offered 70 online courses, as compared with 61 in 2018 and in 2019, and served 1,962 learners, up from 1,220 in 2019. For the first time, these courses included 151 learners at ages 11–17. The course completion rate rose to 17 percent from 12.5 percent in 2019. Surveys indicated that 97.4 percent



of learners were “satisfied” with their course; 97.6 percent would recommend the course to others; and 93.5 percent rated their course as “very high quality” or “high quality.” Throughout its history, the Wilmette Institute has had learners in at least 127 countries.

Eight new courses were added to the selection of noncredit sessions:

- “Cultivating Transformative Leadership”
- Three “Transformative Leadership for Youth” courses, first offered when public schools were closed
- “Mírzá Mihdí, the Purest Branch”
- “Bringing Consultation to the Workplace”
- “Consulting in Marriage and Family”
- “Bahá’u’lláh’s Summons to Two Ottoman Prime Ministers”

By far the most important and successful noncredit course, “Anti-Black Racism in the US and Building a Unified Society,” was offered three times in 2020 to a total of about 300 students. To serve so many, learners from early sessions were recruited as teaching assistants; some later gained faculty status, allowing the course to grow further. This recruitment of teaching assistants and potential faculty has become a model for other courses. The course is being offered to members of many Local Spiritual Assemblies in the Pacific Northwest.

Webinars

In 2020 the Institute offered 58 webinars, a considerable increase over the 19 offered in 2019. Eight of the 58 focused on racial justice; eight on climate change and sustainability; and five on gender equality. The pandemic prompted the Institute to offer as many as three webinars per week in May and June, including a series hosted by actor Mr. Rainn Wilson. It is planning a series of webinars on the life and ministry of ‘Abdul-Bahá in the latter half of 2021.

The Institute’s YouTube channel has 4,640 subscribers, 50 percent more than a year ago, and views since 2015 total 447,000.

Academic Advisory Board

The National Spiritual Assembly appointed a four-member Academic Advisory Board for the Wilmette Institute in fall 2020. Diversification of the Institute’s faculty, staff, and students has been the primary topic at its bimonthly meetings.

Bahá’í campus association initiative

For the past two years, the Wilmette Institute has collected information about Bahá’í campus associations and their activities. In the fall, it created an online discussion platform, “Discourse,” on which these clubs can encourage each other and cross-pollinate ideas for conducting Bahá’í activities on and off campus.

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House of Worship Activities Office

An unprecedented year

In mid-March last year, when it was clear that the rapid spread of COVID-19 had reached pandemic proportions and had become a grave threat to the health and well-being of people across the globe, the National Spiritual Assembly took the unprecedented step of closing the House of Worship and Welcome Center to visitors for an indeterminate length of time. The simultaneous closing of the offices of the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) applied to the Activities Office as well and, together with all BNO staff, Temple staff were required to find new and creative ways to accomplish necessary tasks. Unfortunately, there was no choice but to curtail some of the House of Worship's regularly offered activities.

Happily, the Temple's gardens and walkways have remained open to the public, provided that visitors comply with the health precautions—such as masking and maintaining safe social distancing—mandated by state and local governments and recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). The vast majority of Temple visitors—the numbers of which have not noticeably declined—are adhering to these practices.

Virtual devotional programs

When the House of Worship is open and functioning normally, two devotional programs open to the public are offered in the Temple Auditorium daily—at 9:00 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.—each of them carried out by selected readers.

Following the Temple's closing in March, Activities Office staff transitioned the 12:30 p.m. devotionals to an online (Zoom) platform. Throughout the year the staff, with the generous assistance of trained volunteers, have gained experience and built new capacities, now coordinating daily devotionals virtually, simultaneously livestreaming them on Facebook.

Average attendance of the regular [Zoom devotional programs](#) has varied, at times amounting to several hundred participants daily. Both regular and occasional attendees join the devotionals from locations across the United States and the world. In February, monthly Sunday devotions in Spanish resumed, in collaboration with local Bahá'ís who have faithfully supported the Temple's Spanish programming efforts. Further, a new collaboration with the National Assembly's Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force has begun, and a special devotional for that audience was also held in February.

Holy Days and other special events

The House of Worship's commemorations of Bahá'í Holy Days have also continued and are being held online—in this case, with their elements in pre-recorded form. Throughout the country, Local Spiritual Assemblies, registered groups, and individuals, including friends of the Faith, have been participating in the creation and implementation of Holy Day programs. The attendant close collaboration of the Activities Office staff with US Bahá'í Media Services staff has given birth to a strong and able working team. The

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In what was without a doubt the year's most important development for the House of Worship, the National Spiritual Assembly in January informed the Bahá'í community of its decision to appoint a five-member Temple Board, which will serve as a consultative body coordinating all areas of the functioning of the House of Worship, as well as fostering and supporting action, reflection, study, consultation, training, and the gathering and systematization of experience.



Holy Day programs are being watched in real time by several hundred viewers, with many more benefiting from them in subsequent viewings.

During 2020–21, memorial programs for two noted members of the Bahá'í world community were held in a similar manner. In both cases, the programs were planned in collaboration with sister National Spiritual Assemblies, with most elements being pre-recorded.

The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár and its role in the community

Considerable Activities Office time was given over the past year to a continuing study—focusing on the compilation, *The Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*, prepared by the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Center—of how, by fostering a sense of ownership among those residing in the neighborhoods in its vicinity, a Bahá'í House of Worship can gradually become a community's spiritual center.

The work of the Activities Office will increasingly aim to create deep and lasting ties between the House of Worship and the larger community by strengthening existing friendships and building new ones, and by continuing collaborations with local interfaith groups; artistic, musical, and other creative endeavors; and like-minded organizations and individuals.

Recruitment and training of guides

Though the House of Worship's Guides program has been suspended until the Temple opens again, a Guides Reflection Gathering is being held quarterly to provide an opportunity for the Activities Office and frequent guides to study relevant guidance and keep in touch.

Social media developments

The Activities Office continues to refine efforts in the social media by further developing the House of Worship website, Facebook page, and e-newsletter with the guidance and support of the BNO's new Social Media Office and the Office of Communications.

Establishment of a Temple Board

In what was without a doubt the year's most important development for the House of Worship, the National Spiritual Assembly in January informed the Bahá'í community of its decision to appoint a five-member Temple Board, which will serve as a consultative body coordinating all areas of the functioning of the House of Worship, as well as facilitating learning—by fostering and supporting action, reflection, study, consultation, training, and the gathering and systematization of experience.

The establishment of the Board represents another significant milestone in the Temple's illustrious history, opening the way to untold new achievements.

House of Worship Music Department

Under normal circumstances, the Bahá'í House of Worship [Choir](#) provides, on the first three Sundays each month, a selection of a cappella music based on the sacred scriptures of the world's major religions for the Temple's 12:30 p.m. devotional programs. In addition, the choir provides music for Bahá'í Holy Day observances and for the varied special programs held at the House of Worship in the course of a year.

Normalcy disrupted by the pandemic

Beginning in March 2020, however, normalcy for the choir was disrupted, as the rapid spread of large and increasing numbers of COVID-19 infections across the world was authoritatively recognized as the advance of a pandemic. As a result, the National Spiritual Assembly promptly acted to close the House of Worship and to curtail or altogether cease its regularly scheduled activities for an indeterminate length of time.

Despite the restrictions on freedom of movement and activities in the public square necessitated by the pandemic, throughout the year choir membership remained steady at 20 singers. Since providing choral music for in-person devotional programs was no longer possible, the music director and a few members of the choir joined singers across the country in providing music for the daily virtual devotional programs that have replaced devotionals normally offered in the Temple's Auditorium. The choir continues to hold weekly rehearsals in the form of online Zoom meetings

in an effort to keep the group's unity and esprit de corps strong and vibrant and to maintain its community-building orientation.

Exploring "virtual music"

The choir has explored and begun performing a type of "virtual music" that is far more difficult technically than performing music live. It has, moreover, given the choir opportunities to visually tell the story of the music being sung and the ability to provide supporting quotations from the Bahá'í writings. This choir is the first of the choirs performing in Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the world to employ this method. Three virtual performances have so far been completed and another is in development. The method has allowed many singers in distant locations to join the choir.

Annual Bahá'í Choral Music Festival

Without question the most popular event every year on the Temple's calendar, the Bahá'í Choral Music Festival brings well over a thousand friends and neighbors from communities near the Temple to two devotional concerts. The past year—but for the disruption caused by the pandemic—would have featured the Fourteenth Annual Bahá'í Choral Music Festival. However, it, too, had to be canceled, causing many singers who regularly look forward to participating to forgo their annual visit to Wilmette to join old friends and make new ones. It is presently unclear whether the Festival will be held in 2021.

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Outreach performances

For some years now, the choir has been happily responding to invitations to participate in events in the larger community, the majority of which are sponsored by interfaith organizations and local churches.

Thanks to the music director’s continuing cordial relationship with local faith communities, the choir has been able to join with a choir from a synagogue for the largest annual interfaith Thanksgiving program in the Wilmette area. This year, the choir was able to include a song based on a Bahá’í text, with the music director as soloist.

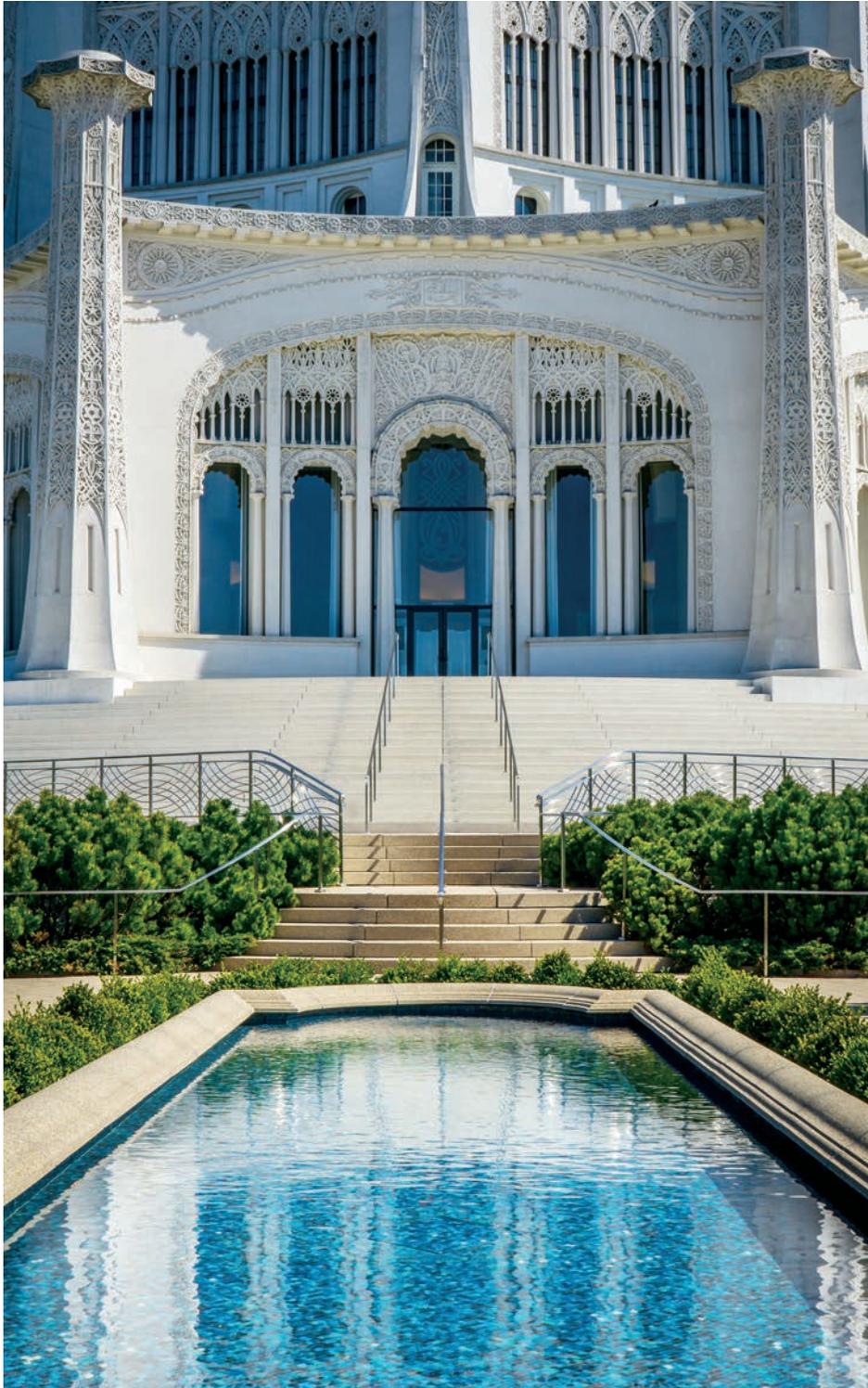
Activities of the music director

Both the inequities in the quality of health care in communities of color strikingly revealed by the pandemic and the summer of unrest across the country provoked by the deaths of George Floyd and several other African Americans in interactions with police have created unprecedented opportunities for the music director to become more fully integrated in and familiar with the communities lining the North Shore of Chicago and surrounding the House of Worship, and

he has been warmly welcomed as a life-time advocate for and speaker on racial equality and justice.

The music director’s participation in a variety of local groups active in dialogue on and promotion of racial equality and justice continued and expanded through:

- Regular support of and membership in five community organizations, four of which deal with race awareness on the North Shore.
- Hosting a monthly “Intimate Dialogue on Race” preceded by readings from sacred scriptures. This is an outgrowth of regular devotional meetings with a focus on racial justice.
- Appointment to the Human Relations Commission of the Village of Wilmette.
- Conducting workshops on race at the North Shore YMCA and the Barrington Morning Rotary Club. This has led to further such sessions being planned for the Northbrook and Mount Prospect Public Libraries.

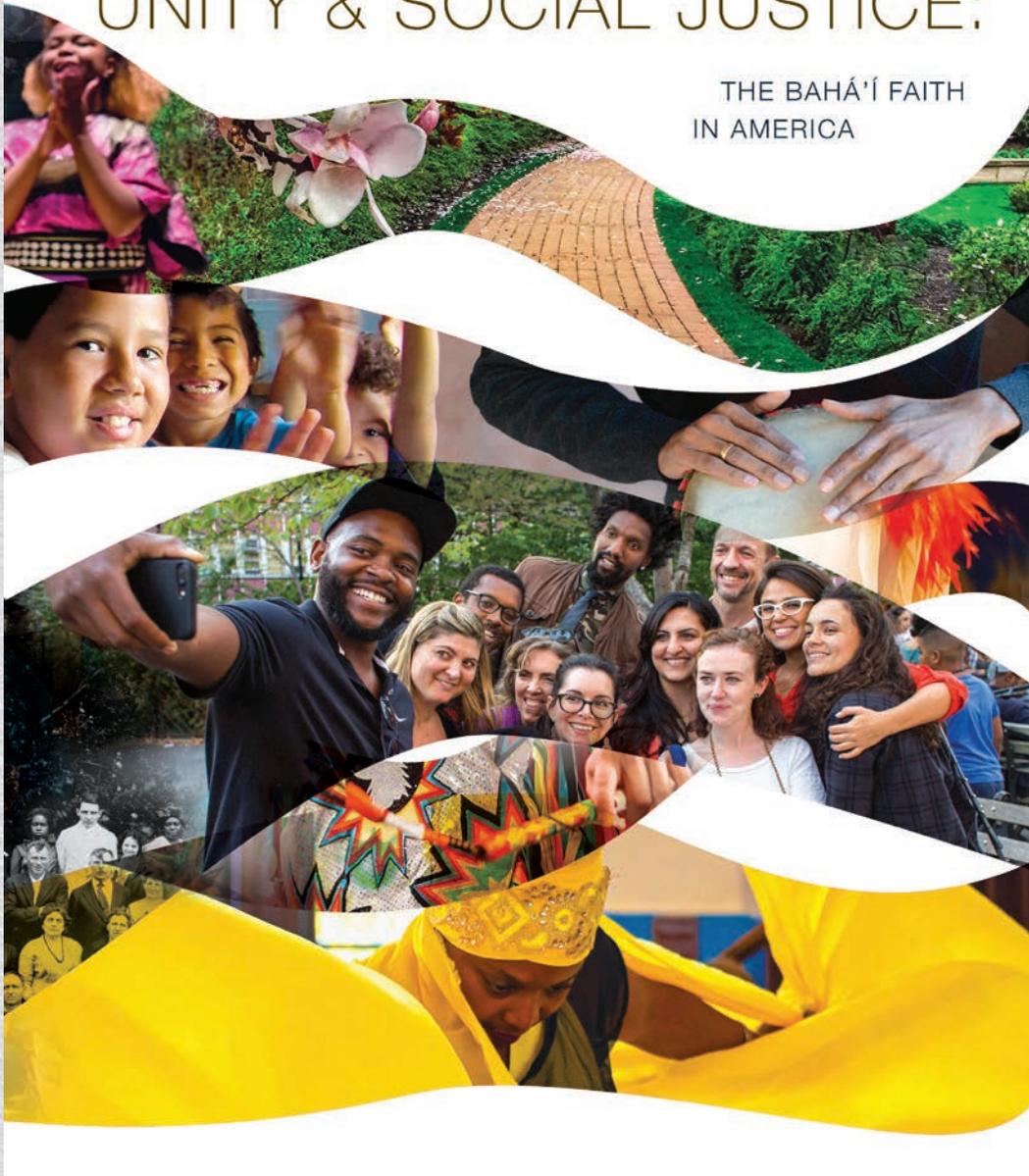


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SOLOIST

A SPIRITUAL PATH TO UNITY & SOCIAL JUSTICE:

THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH
IN AMERICA



Office of Communications

During this remarkable year, two realities—the public health crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed nationwide attention to issues of race and social justice—affected nearly every aspect of the core mission of the Office of Communications, which is to create and deliver content in ways that spark interest and facilitate engagement in the Faith’s activities.

Transition to virtual events

Starting in April 2020, all promotional efforts involving in-person events had to be retooled to promote the virtual events that replaced them. A set of landing pages and social media posts intended to invite interested parties to devotional gatherings was reconfigured to promote the daily virtual devotional gatherings at the Bahá’í House of Worship. This partnership with the House of Worship continued throughout the year, as the Office assisted with the creation and promotion of special devotional programs for each of the Bahá’í Holy Days in which hundreds of people across the world participated.

A similar challenge faced the Internet Campaign team in New York, which helps teaching teams in more than 30 clusters nationwide learn how to use social media tools to invite contacts to occasions for meaningful conversation. The team was able to accompany local teams as they shifted to virtual events, maintaining the pace of weekly campaigns. The number of clusters using social media in this way expanded to nearly 50 by the end of the year.

Increased focus on race and social justice

As summer got underway, the horrific death of George Floyd while in Minneapolis police custody brought new attention to issues of race and social justice. In June, the Office of Communications launched a [Race Unity Action resource website](#) to serve as a repository of guidance, inspiration, and resources designed to assist individuals, communities, and institutions as they

reflect on issues of race and make plans for action. Dozens of reports and examples of creative approaches have been submitted and are being shared on the site.

The story of how the Minneapolis Bahá’í Center—located steps away from the spot where George Floyd died—became a hub of community activity was the subject of a print article in *The American Bahá’í*, as well as a five-part story in the series of *A Rich Tapestry* videos. Telling a single story using a variety of media exemplifies a trend in the Office: Reporters acquire information knowing that it will be delivered on various platforms—including video, the written word, audio, and photographs. This approach makes stories accessible to audience members whatever their media preference.

Stories that reflect community learning and growth

The American Bahá’í, meanwhile, shifted from six to four issues a year to support the community’s quarterly learning cycles. To that end, it seeks to provide more in-depth analytical reporting of trends and developments in the American Bahá’í community. A digital “ezine” edition of the magazine was launched on Google Play Store, alongside the already available iPad version.

The Office also diversified the voices and perspectives reflected in its storytelling by recruiting freelance writers to assist with reporting. New stories are published in *The American Bahá’í* and weekly on www.bahai.us/stories in the categories of building community, social impact, House of Worship, and lifestyle features. Users can subscribe to receive new content via the monthly *US Bahá’í News* e-newsletter, whose subscriber base has grown to more than 28,000.

Special publications

During 2020–21, the Office published *A Spiritual Path to Unity and Social Justice: The Bahá’í Faith in America*, a magazine-format publication modeled

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with [The American Bahá’í](#),
[US Bahá’í Media Services](#),
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During 2020–21, the Office published *A Spiritual Path to Unity and Social Justice: The Bahá’í Faith in America*, a magazine-format publication modeled on the 2017 publication *The Bahá’ís*. The richly illustrated magazine serves as a general introduction to the Faith with a focus on how its framework for action is being used to systematically address the nation’s social ills.

Using volunteers and national staff who were displaced from their regular service due to the pandemic, live coverage of the toll-free 800-22-UNITE number and the “chat now” feature on www.bahai.us was expanded into evenings and weekends across all US time zones.

on the 2017 publication *The Bahá'ís*. The richly illustrated magazine serves as a general introduction to the Faith with a focus on how its framework for action is being used to systematically address the nation's social ills.

Inquiry Services

The Inquiry Services team, which also works under the umbrella of the Office of Communications, was able to expand its service to the thousands of Bahá'ís and members of the general public who contact the Bahá'í National Center with requests for information every year. Using volunteers and national staff who were displaced from their regular service due to the pandemic, live coverage of the toll-free 800-22-UNITE number and the “chat now” feature on www.bahai.us was expanded into evenings and weekends across all US time zones. The Inquiry Services team also provided training and accompaniment to the network of regional coordinators and hundreds of cluster and local responders who engage with seekers who initiate contact through these and other channels. Nearly 5,000 inquiries and about 500 enrollments were processed this year.

Progress also continued toward the creation of a robust new inquiry management system to replace the outdated Seeker Response System.

A unified presence on the Web

Efforts continued to enhance the Faith's Web presence at national and local levels. The Office supported the launch of a major new section of the Office of Public Affairs website (www.bahai.us/public-affairs) devoted to efforts to contribute to national discourses. It also provided technical assistance for the design, development, and hosting of a new website (bahaiworld.bahai.org) for *The Bahá'í World* publication. An effort to create modular templates for local Bahá'í community websites advanced significantly, and the first website using the new template system was created by Bahá'í communities in North Carolina's Triangle (triangle.bahais.us).

THE AMERICAN BAHÁ'Í

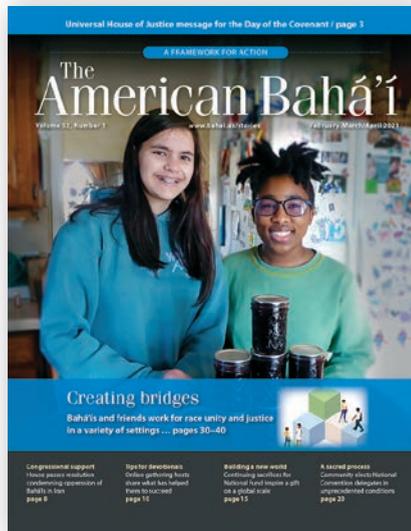
Numerous transitions marked 2020–21 for *The American Bahá'í* as it continued its efforts to inform, inspire, educate, and unify the US Bahá'í community. The onset of the pandemic in the spring left *The American Bahá'í* little opportunity to celebrate the national recognition of its 2019 issues as “Best in Class” among periodicals in the Religion Communicators Council's DeRose-Hinkhouse Memorial Communications Awards program.

A unique and challenging year

As with most of the National Spiritual Assembly's offices and agencies, staff members had to learn on scant notice how to collaborate from separate work spaces at their homes. The midsummer retirement of a longtime editor and writer, with no immediate replacement due to hiring challenges, required a tighter collaboration between the staff of *The American Bahá'í* and that of the greater Office of Communications in carrying out their closely aligned missions. One element of that collaboration is a new system for utilizing freelance and volunteer writers and photographers to generate content for the national Bahá'í website and the magazine.

These changes made it expedient to put in place a long-contemplated objective: the establishment of a quarterly publication schedule, reducing issue frequency. With the involvement of the Learning Desk and nearly a dozen other stakeholder offices, an extended conversation is underway regarding how the journal will refine its vision and mission of service. Of particular focus are two initial objectives for the quarterly scheme:

- To support the community's practice of planning and reflecting on three-month cycles.
- To offer more-analytical perspectives on the progress of the Cause in our national community, even as journalistic reports of activities continue to be posted week by week on the “Stories” section of the www.bahai.us website.



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As 2020 progressed, two developments that dominated national discourses—the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in awareness of systemic racism in this country—heavily influenced the choices and the editorial organization of the content of *The American Bahá'í*. Individual articles, story packages, and entire sections in various issues cast light on how Bahá'ís, their friends, and their communities are addressing those concerns through the teachings and the activities of the Plan.

As continued consultation helps clarify guiding principles, the magazine's visual presentation and written content is expected to evolve significantly in the coming year.

Parallel editions

The American Bahá'í, in its printed and ezine editions, continues to be a news mainstay and a reinforcer of Bahá'í identity for tens of thousands of Bahá'í households from coast to coast. It serves to disseminate guidance from the Faith's senior institutions, providing focus and direction for our activities; to inspire and encourage the national community to carry forward the Divine Plan; and to share news of how Bahá'ís are acting on the national, regional, and local levels to build community, to further the Cause, and to benefit humanity.

An ezine application, years in development for iPad, is now available for Android tablets as well, significantly expanding the number of people who have electronic access to the journal. Due to technical constraints, the app is available to the general public—without being restricted to enrolled Bahá'ís—through both the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store. It contains many links to additional resources for enrolled Bahá'ís who can sign in with a Bahá'í Online Services account.

In the four issues published since Riqván 2020, most articles continued to focus on various elements of the framework and activities of the Five Year Plan. As 2020 progressed, two developments that dominated national discourses—the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in awareness of systemic racism in this country—heavily influenced the choices and the editorial organization of the journal's content. Individual articles, story packages, and entire sections in various issues cast light on how Bahá'ís, their friends, and their communities are addressing those concerns through the teachings and the activities of the Plan. This includes a [remarkable article](#) on how Bahá'ís in Minneapolis, whose Bahá'í Center is only a few hundred feet from the site of George Floyd's killing, began to take

part in a culture of service that emerged from severe needs in the neighborhood. This article inspired production of a five-part documentary set in Minneapolis as part of the [video series *A Rich Tapestry*](#) on www.bahai.us.

Vital collaborations

To produce content for the “[Stories](#)” section of the www.bahai.us website, which supports and reflects the movement of populations toward the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, staff of *The American Bahá'í* continued to join in the efforts of the Web Editorial Team alongside colleagues in the Office of Communications and Media Services. This has strengthened capacity to create articles on Five Year Plan activity that are understandable and informative for a public audience, while also useful and illuminating for deepened Bahá'ís and their partners in the Plan. Much of this content continues to be republished in the magazine itself.

Regular study and consultation with the Learning Desk continues to inform staff's understanding of the Plan's priorities, and influences ideas and choices in content creation. The publication benefits from collaborations with the Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh in the United States and the Regional Bahá'í Councils; with the Office of Assembly Development, the Bahá'í Distribution Service, *Brilliant Star*, the Office of Community Administration, Fund Development, Human Resources, Inquiry Services, the National Statistics Office, the Persian Public Information Office, the Office of Public Affairs, and the Social Action Desk. Staff members also work with the Office of the Secretary to help produce the National Spiritual Assembly's Annual Report, which has itself won DeRose-Hinkhouse Awards as an overall publication and for its graphic design.

US BAHÁ'Í MEDIA SERVICES

Despite the strictures of working from home during the pandemic, most of Media Services' activity continued with a manageable degree of adaptation and the collaboration of freelancers and volunteers.

Video productions that Media Services produced or supported include:

- Additions to the online story collection *A Rich Tapestry* (details below)
- Live-streamed Bahá'í Holy Day programs, created in collaboration with the Bahá'í House of Worship and producers across the continent
- A special video message from the National Spiritual Assembly in the wake of the cancellation of the 112th US Bahá'í National Convention
- “Virtual choir” videos offered in lieu of the Annual Bahá'í Choral Festival
- A PBS television series on the history of race amity (details below)

In collaboration with the Office of Information Technology and the National Bahá'í Archives, Media Services continues research on organization, permanent storage, and backup of existing digital video files. The project to digitize the aging collection of videotapes was temporarily paused, as was maintenance of media presentations at the House of Worship's Welcome Center.

Media Services helped spearhead the Office of Communications' Strategic Promotions Team, which learns through research and action about carrying out informational campaigns using social media and other avenues.

A Rich Tapestry: production and conversation

The team producing *A Rich Tapestry* (a video collection posted at www.bahai.us/collection/a-rich-tapestry/) includes Media Services staff and independent professionals. It continues to identify and develop powerful stories of people using the framework for action in ways that address matters of race and justice. This work is informed by study of guidance on race in the United States, including spring and summer 2020 messages from the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly.

Its most recent video production, “Minneapolis: Playing a Humble Part,” is

a five-part report on service and community building in the neighborhood of the city's Bahá'í Center in the months after the nearby killing of George Floyd and the resulting social turmoil. To encourage deeper engagement with its themes, it has additionally been posted with study materials on the Race Unity Action resources website (www.bahai.us/race-unity-action).

Two other significant videos were posted since spring 2020:

- “Being Heard in the Face of Paternalism,” reflections on growing empowerment in the voices of people in the Navajo Nation
- “Crossing Ethnic Boundaries,” recounting how young Latin American and African immigrants in Phoenix have joined forces to build community

To learn about how these stories might stimulate discourse grounded in the principle of oneness, the Tapestry team conducted online “Unconventional Discussions on Race” using the two latter videos. People who had appeared in the stories shared their experiences in applying community-building principles where they live, and guests were invited through social media or special outreach. (See the box on [page 142](#) for sample comments.)

At this past year's North American inter-institutional meeting in Houston, one participant quoted a viewer as saying about the Tapestry collection, “Everyone I show these videos to wants to be a protagonist. It's neat how the stories are all told from the perspective of the protagonists. This made us see that we weren't doing that on our narratives. We were telling the story from our perspective and now we've made a shift.”

Storytellers' collective

Starting with small numbers, Media Services and the Tapestry team have begun fostering a storytellers' collective to build capacity in finding and sharing stories of community building. Through

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In January and February, WGBH-TV in Boston premiered the series *American Stories: Race Amity and the Other Tradition*, produced with the support of the National Spiritual Assembly and with members of the Tapestry team participating in production and editing. It is hoped that it will be made available for nationwide viewing by the Public Broadcasting System in April.

a few online gatherings, a diverse group of youth and young adults from various parts of the country has grown to about 12. Together they have studied Universal House of Justice messages and discussed principles of storytelling used in the making of the film *A Widening Embrace*. Growth of the group through the young people's social networks is being encouraged.

Improving accessibility

As Media Services learns about presenting stories to be accessible to diverse audiences, it is developing a video story that will have subtitles and dubbing in Spanish, Kinyarwanda, and English. A project has also been launched to add Spanish subtitles to videos issued in past years.

To ensure their accessibility to the blind, Media Services is studying the use of audio descriptions in video stories. This entails a secondary audio track with a narrator, during natural pauses in the main dialogue, describing key visual elements such as activity, graphics, and on-screen text.

Public television collaboration

In January and February, WGBH-TV in Boston premiered the series [*American Stories: Race Amity and the Other Tradition*](#), produced with the support of the National Spiritual Assembly and with members of the Tapestry team participating in production and editing. It is hoped that it will be made available for nationwide viewing by the Public Broadcasting System in April.

The series' five episodes highlight interracial friendships that had significant effects in promoting race amity, including such stories as "The Preacher and the Rabbi: Rev. Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel"; "The Low Country Teacher and The Liberal Hillbilly: Septima Clark and Myles Horton"; "Godmothers of Race Amity: Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt"; and others.

A sampling of comments from participants in the "Unconventional Discussions on Race," stimulated by videos from the series *A Rich Tapestry*:

From discussion on "Being Heard in the Face of Paternalism":

"We are all related."

"I cried. It's beautiful. It's us."

"Proud to be an Anishinabe Ojibwe Bahá'í w/5 generations of Bahá'ís in family."

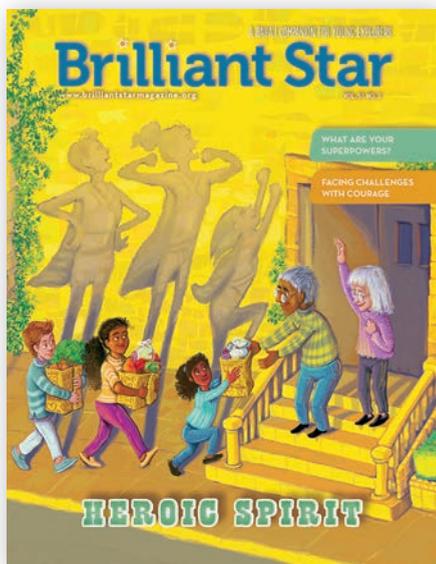
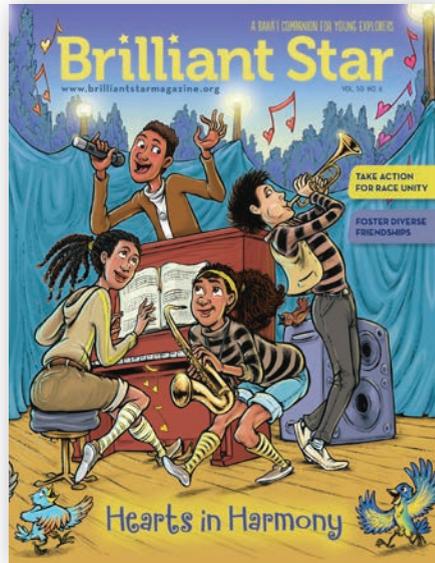
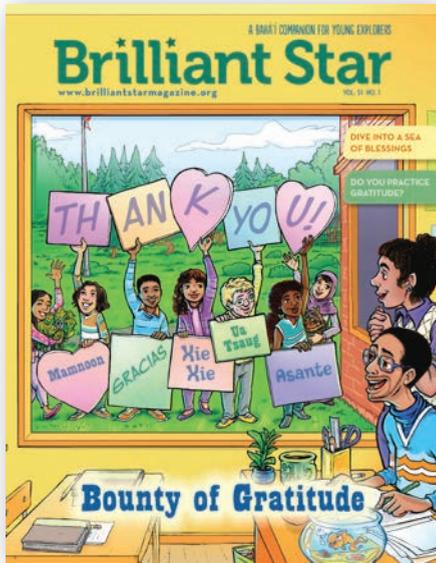
"Beautiful example of how we can soar if we are not shackled with paternalism . . . May we find greater humility and love, and be more respectful so that we can see truth and love no matter the house in which it shines."

From discussion on "Crossing Ethnic Boundaries":

"Beautiful. Thank you . . . for always being there for the children."

"I love the coming together of people of different cultures and backgrounds."

"I think the idea of deliberately inviting diversity is so important . . . and so difficult . . . to do. I hope this model shows people how to do it."



BRILLIANT STAR

Brilliant Star helps to advance the Five Year Plan through its twofold mission to engage and encourage children and adults. First, it supports the spiritual and intellectual development of children and junior youth, empowering them as world citizens. Second, it provides valuable resources for parents and teachers to use in education and community-building activities. The magazine's content covers timely themes creatively, making *Brilliant Star* an inviting way to share the Bahá'í Faith with others and an accessible tool for those who wish to contribute to public discourse.

Readers say that *Brilliant Star* uplifts and educates them:

"I feel good reading this magazine because I learn a lot, and I read about the interest[s] of other Bahá'í kids my age. I've learned about Bahá'u'lláh's past and what other people have done to help others."

—Nika P.

"It makes me feel happy inside to read about the Bahá'í Faith and things we can do to make the world a better place."

—Marisa K.

The magazine earned a Mom's Choice Gold Award for its most recent series of issues (Vol. 50 Nos. 1–4). The Mom's Choice Award program, which evaluates thousands of entries from over 55 countries, is globally recognized as a sign of excellence in family-friendly materials. *Brilliant Star* also received honors from the Religion Communicators Council: a DeRose-Hinkhouse Award of Excellence for C. Aaron Kreader's "Light of Faith" cover art and an Award of Merit for the "Light of Faith" issue.

The magazine earned a Mom's Choice Gold Award for its most recent series of issues (Vol. 50 Nos. 1–4). The Mom's Choice Award program, which evaluates thousands of entries from over 55 countries, is globally recognized as a sign of excellence in family-friendly materials.

Brilliant Star Online, the magazine's Web presence, is essential for developing and nurturing strong relationships with a global community of readers that includes children, junior youth, parents, and teachers. The community often accesses materials on mobile devices.

Three issues were produced in 2020–21: “Hearts in Harmony” (Vol. 50 No. 6), “Bounty of Gratitude” (Vol. 51 No. 1), and “Heroic Spirit” (Vol. 51 No. 2). The magazine's staff continues to collaborate with the Office of Education and Schools. Despite the pandemic, over 500 copies of “Hearts in Harmony” were distributed to students at seasonal schools around the country. *Brilliant Star* staff also presented a workshop about the magazine's resources as part of one school's online program. The next race unity issue will be recommended to Bahá'í seasonal schools in 2021 to complement their race unity curriculum. As it did last year, the magazine will create an “Inspiration and Resources Guide” to provide teachers with ideas for classroom activities for children from various age groups.

Teachers share their enthusiasm for *Brilliant Star*:

“We love *Brilliant Star*. Please continue to focus on race unity and justice. It is so important for little children to learn about the oneness of mankind, so they grow up without prejudices. Thank you!”

—Michele P.

“Everything in the magazine is truly wonderful and relevant to my work as a teacher. It broadens my ideas of possibilities. It enhances my ability to teach kids how to apply the Word of God to their daily lives.”

—Carolyn P.

Dr. Stephen Scotti, a NASA Distinguished Research Associate, continues to volunteer as our STEM Education Advisor. He writes and provides constructive comments about STEM-related content, answers questions from readers on space and science, and introduces us to other STEM contributors. He interviewed NASA astronaut Leland Melvin for a new “Space Ace” video for *Brilliant Star* Online.

[Brilliant Star Online](#), the magazine's Web presence, is essential for developing and nurturing strong relationships with a global community of readers that

includes children, junior youth, parents, and teachers. The community often accesses materials on mobile devices. The Luminous Library, an extensive PDF database of searchable and printable magazine issues, is another popular resource, providing immediate access to over 45 full issues.

One child, Vera S., said, “I love the website. For our children's part during Feast, we went on *Brilliant Star*'s website and learned about Robert Turner. Then, we took the world citizen quiz. It was really fun!”

Magazine staff produced “*Brilliant Star*'s Treasure Box” for *The American Bahá'í* to complement the core activities. Staff consistently engage the audience through social media and work with award-winning scientists for the “We Are One” and “Space Ace” features.

Brilliant Star provides complimentary subscriptions to US children's class teachers, junior youth group animators, and school teachers and counselors. During 2020–21, 107 subscribing teachers reached 1,471 kids.

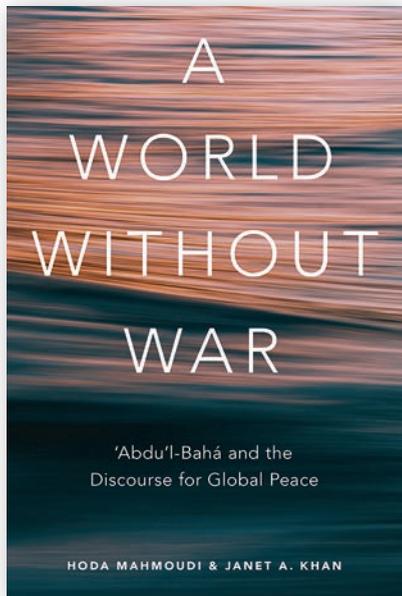
Balancing time and human resources for the magazine, website, and special projects is a continuing challenge. Another major challenge since April 2019 has been planning for an office relocation.

The pandemic disrupted workflows and increased stress for everyone. Cognizant of this, *Brilliant Star* staff members adjusted editorial practices to accommodate the community's needs for virtual activities. Onsite staff members have worked from home since March 2020. To strengthen communication, unity, and mutual support, staff hold weekly videoconferences to supplement daily interactions that occur as needed.

The *Brilliant Star* team is thankful for the opportunity it has to encourage children and youth to help create a “just, diverse, and united society that can increasingly manifest the oneness of the human family.”

Bahá'í Publishing Trust and Distribution Service

For the Bahá'í Publishing Trust (BPT), the year 2020–21 was busy, productive, and marked by a wide range of successful events and online activities. Even as public health measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 forced staff to shift to working remotely, the BPT's commitment to “diffusing the fragrances of God” and serving the needs of its customers remained strong. Including new titles and reprints, the BPT published nearly 40 titles this year



and made significant advances in other areas.

The spring/summer publishing season saw the release of a series called *Pause & Reflect*, intended for a general audience interested in meditation, mindfulness, and similar practices. *Pause & Reflect: Meditations for Creativity* and *Pause & Reflect: Meditations for Families* became available in rapid succession in the spring. As BPT staff reflected on the summer's events

surrounding racial justice protests throughout the country, it quickly released a third title, *Pause & Reflect: Meditations for Justice*.

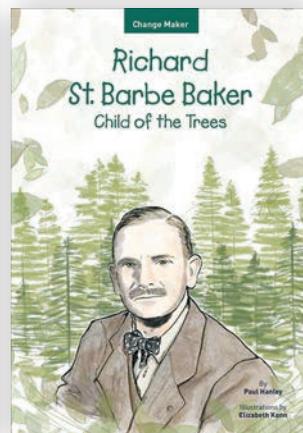
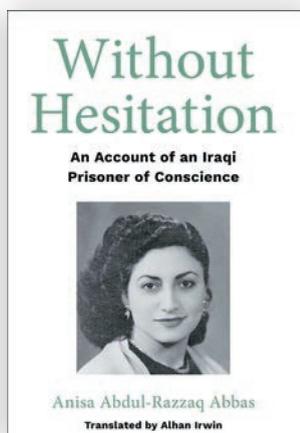
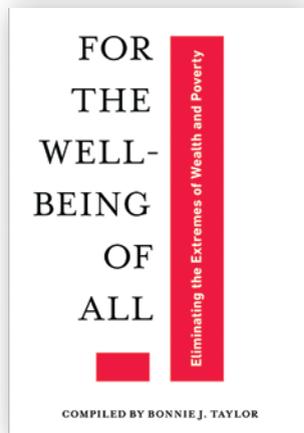
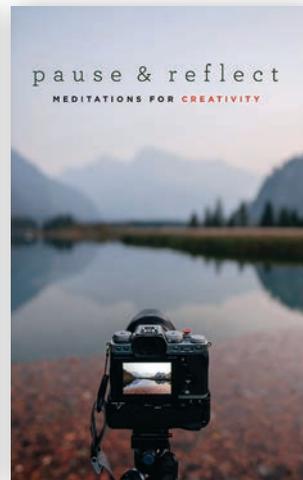
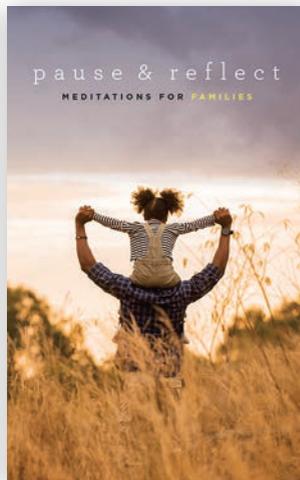
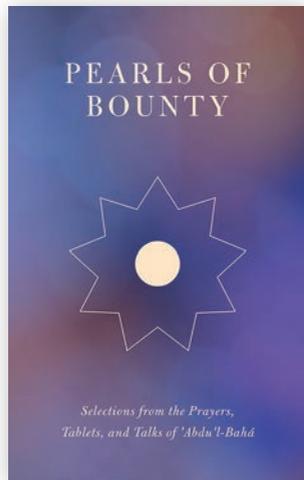
Meanwhile, *A World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace* by Janet Khan and Hoda Mahmoudi, a summer release, marked the centenary of the delivery of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historic Tablets to the Hague. A third title in the Change Maker series—*Richard St. Barbe Baker: Child of the Trees*, written by Paul Hanley and illustrated by Elizabeth Konn—was also released to inspire young readers to engage in environmental conservation.

Social Action, a compilation provided by the Bahá'í World Center, followed in the fall, along with *For the Well-Being of All: Eliminating the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty*, compiled by Bonnie J. Taylor. The 178 B.E. datebook became available in the fall, and the corresponding 178 B.E. wall calendar featured images solicited from around the world based on the theme “walking in the footsteps of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.” At year's end, the BPT released the much-anticipated title *Without Hesitation: An Account of an Iraqi Prisoner of Conscience*, a memoir by Anisa Abdul-Razzaq Abbas.

Meanwhile, the upcoming Centenary of the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá claimed the editorial department's focus as it mapped out plans for 2021. The first quarter of the year will see the release of two titles related to this momentous occasion. The first, *Pearls of Bounty: Selections from the Prayers, Tablets, and Talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, contains several recent translations of the Master's words. The second—*The Sweetness of His Love: Stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, written by Jacqueline

A *World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace* by Janet Khan and Hoda Mahmoudi, a summer release, marked the centenary of the delivery of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's historic Tablets to the Hague.

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Mehrabi and illustrated by Jaci Ayorinde—contains 38 richly illustrated stories for children about the life of the Master. Also due for publication in early 2021 is a fourth title in the Change Maker series—*Hazel Scott: A Woman, a Piano, and a Commitment to Justice*, written by Susan Engle and illustrated by Luthando Mazibuko.

Other titles planned for 2021 include a series of five booklets featuring thematic arrangements of the Master's words, new editions of *The Sheltering Branch* by Marzieh Gail, and *Voyage of Love* by Amy Renshaw. All of these mark the Centenary by offering outstanding materials for reflection on the life and example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

The Publishing Trust also released 18 new e-books this year, bringing its total to nearly 190. These are downloadable from the [Bahá'í Distribution Service website](#), and from Amazon, iBookstore,

Barnes & Noble, Google, Kobo, and Overdrive. Further, it launched the Bahaibookstore mobile app in both Android and Apple iOS formats to give customers another channel to access and purchase materials offered by the Bahá'í Distribution Service.



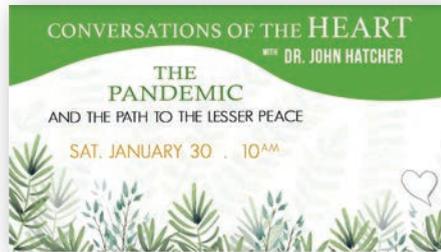
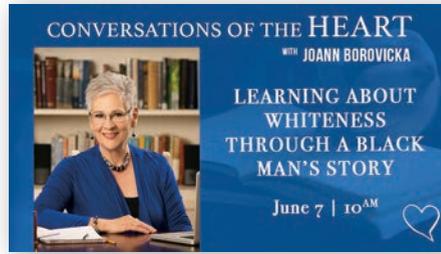
Other electronic and audio books continued to be offered at no cost, including Bahá'í prayer books, *The Hidden Words*, and teaching materials in nearly 13 languages. Visitors from approximately 172 countries downloaded these resources, with an average of 1,000 downloads per month.

The year's regular marketing and promotional activities included nearly 120 weekly newsletters, which were opened at a rate of 17–18 percent (consistent

with the industry average); daily social media posts; and outreach to various third-party media and Internet outlets to encourage author interviews and reviews.

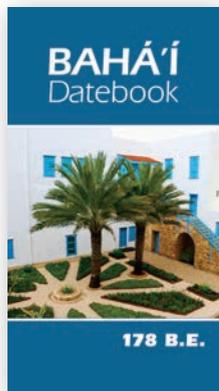
The Bahá'í Distribution Service (BDS) maintained its status as the primary distributor for both the Bahá'í Publishing Trust and Bahá'í World Center publications. In this capacity, 75 new titles from third-party publishers were added to BDS's portfolio last year, bringing the number of available titles to nearly 750. BDS had seamlessly fulfilled and shipped nearly 7,300 customer orders as of January of this year, in most cases within 24 hours of being received.

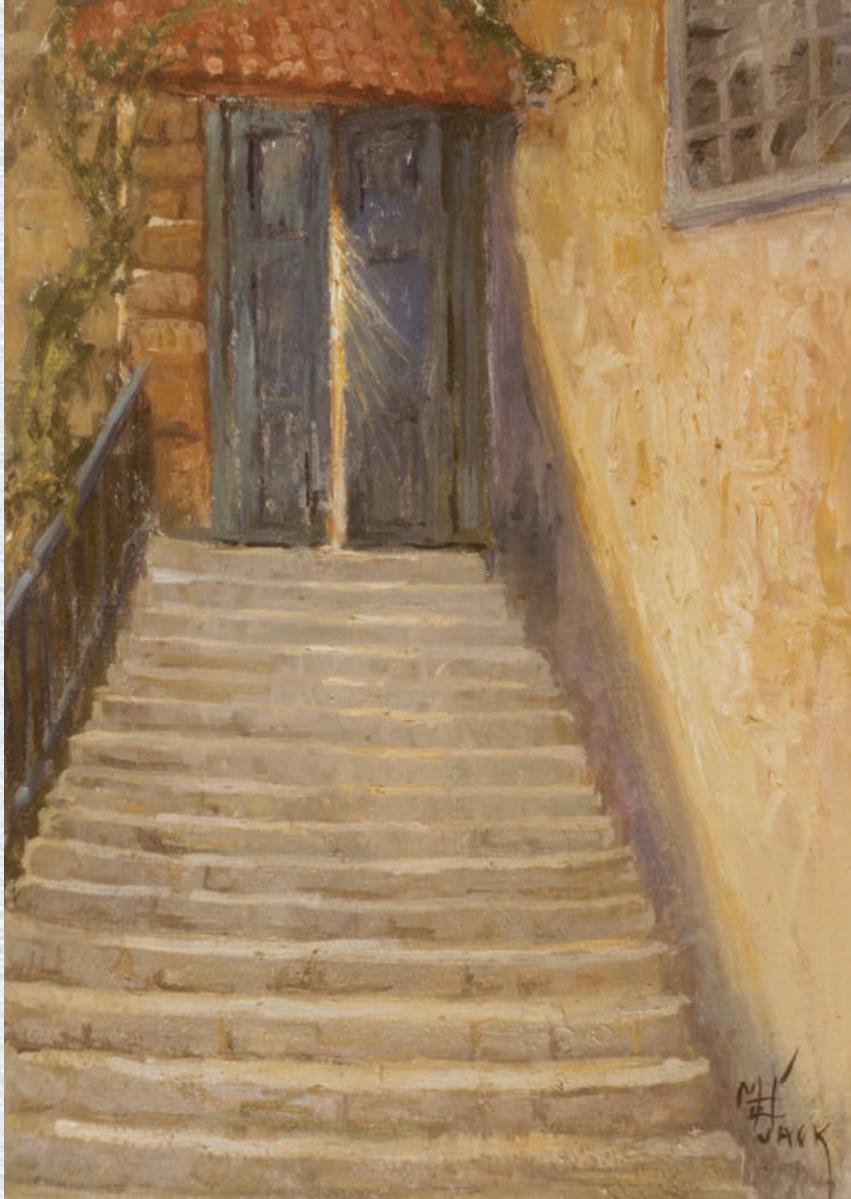
During the year, the BPT staff has consulted regularly with other units in the Bahá'í National Organization, reflecting on recent learnings and identifying lines of action. Several new initiatives emerged, including adding a "Look Inside" feature for most titles on the BDS website. Several successful webinars were also planned and launched, including two "Conversations of the Heart" held in collaboration with Green Acre Bahá'í School, featuring author presentations. The BPT and the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America also co-hosted a number of book launches.



Beyond BahaiBookstore.com online sales, the BPT, in collaboration with its trade distribution partner, Independent Publishers Group (IPG), further expanded its releases to the broader market, including through Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

During the year, the BPT staff has consulted regularly with other units in the Bahá'í National Organization, reflecting on recent learnings and identifying lines of action. Several new initiatives emerged, including adding a "Look Inside" feature for most titles on the BDS website. Several successful webinars were also planned and launched.





National Bahá'í Archives

The National Bahá'í Archives acquires, preserves, and provides access to materials documenting the history and activities of the National Spiritual Assembly and the United States Bahá'í community, in accordance with Shoghi Effendi's guidance that:

The importance of the institution of Bahá'í Archives is not due only to the many teaching facilities it procures, but is essentially to be found in the vast amount of historical data and information it offers both to the present-day administrators of the Cause, and to the Bahá'í historians of the future.

The most cherished possessions of the Archives are the collections of original Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and letters from Shoghi Effendi that it preserves and protects. The Archives also serves as a repository for the permanent records of the National Spiritual Assembly, the Bahá'í National Organization, and the Regional Bahá'í Councils, and assists Local Spiritual Assemblies and other Bahá'í institutions to manage their records, supporting the development of administrative systems.

The Archives welcomes donations of the personal papers of individual Bahá'ís, as well as materials documenting all segments of the diverse and ever-changing Bahá'í community. Since Riḍván 2020, the Archives has received nearly 100 accessions of records, personal papers, photographs, and audiovisual materials, including seven original letters and two cables sent by the Guardian, 27 collections or additions to the archival papers



of individuals, oral history recordings, legacy audiovisual recordings, and several thousand digital images and files in various formats.

Due to closure of the Bahá'í National Center offices during much of the year, the Archives received comparatively few administrative records. Archives staff arranged and described about 50 linear feet of records, personal papers, and historical photographs. The National Bahá'í Library, which is maintained by the Archives, continues to receive donations of books, pamphlets, and other printed materials, in addition to books acquired by purchase.

During 2020–21, Archives staff responded to more than 750 reference requests from individuals, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and the offices of the National Center. The Archives hosted only two visiting researchers this year, due to the closure of the reading room as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. By contrast, the staff assisted a large number of remote researchers by making and sharing digital images of historical documents.

Recent months have seen advancements

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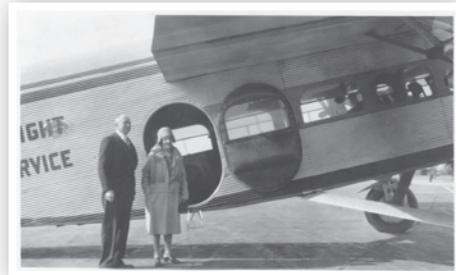
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Recent months have seen advancements in the planned construction of the new National Bahá'í Archives facility. An existing building will be gutted and structurally reinforced. It will be refitted with modern high-quality utilities, fire protection and security, climate control systems, and new, dignified furnishings. The early 20th century limestone façade, which had been remodeled in the 1960s, will be restored to its original appearance.

Because the records of today become the archives of the future, investment in good recordkeeping practices brings both near-term and future benefits. However, maintaining trustworthy digital records can be challenging, especially in circumstances with inconsistent staffing, so the Archives staff continues to advise Spiritual Assemblies to retain copies of their most important documents on paper whenever possible.

in the planned construction of the new National Bahá'í Archives facility. An existing building, which is in the vicinity of the House of Worship and which the National Spiritual Assembly has owned for many years, will be gutted and structurally reinforced. It will be refitted with modern high-quality utilities, fire protection and security, climate control systems, and new, dignified furnishings. The early 20th century limestone façade, which had been remodeled in the 1960s, will be restored to its original appearance. The storage system, occupying about two-thirds of the building's interior, will consist of custom-designed mobile compact shelving units to maximize efficiency, safety, and convenience. These are expected to hold all the



today become the archives of the future, investment in good recordkeeping practices brings both near-term and future benefits. However, maintaining trustworthy digital records can be challenging, especially in circumstances with inconsistent staffing, so the Archives staff continues to advise Spiritual Assemblies to retain copies of their most important documents on paper whenever possible. Guidelines for local Assemblies and community archives are available upon emailed request (archives@usbnc.org).



archives stored in current quarters in the House of Worship, as well as materials stored offsite, with room to spare. Construction is expected to be underway by July 2021.

Archives staff are learning to better preserve and provide access to digital materials, and to assist Bahá'í National Organization agencies and Local Spiritual Assemblies to better manage their own records. Good recordkeeping helps to enhance the capacity of Assemblies and other Bahá'í organizations to carry out their many responsibilities on behalf of an expanding community. Because the records of

During the past year, work on the Archives audiovisual digitization program, a collaborative line of action with US Bahá'í Media Services, continued at a slower pace due to the pandemic and staffing limitations, but several hundred recordings were digitized and the catalogued collection now stands at about 5,100 items. Significant progress was achieved with the installation of a digital media management system to replace the spreadsheets and databases used until now. The process of migrating catalog data into the new system is still in its early stages, but already a number of advantages have been seen. The digital media management system is expected to be of great benefit to the Bahá'í National Organization and to researchers, who increasingly request audiovisual materials along with documents.



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Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project

The Encyclopedia Project website offers a sampling of detailed, meticulously researched, signed, and illustrated articles. Reflecting increased Internet use during the pandemic, the number of both website users and users' page views more than doubled in April 2020 and remained high, at times peaking even higher during the remainder of the year.

The Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project has a decades-long history. It dates back to the early 1980s, when the plight of our coreligionists in Iran had brought unprecedented international attention to their Faith. When members of the media, academics, policymakers, and others sought reliable information on the Faith's history and teachings, however, they encountered scattered and often inaccurate or conflicting accounts. Even for Bahá'ís, in-depth data and analysis could be elusive. This reality sparked the vision of producing a well-researched, comprehensive reference work under the aegis of the National Spiritual Assembly, with guidance from the Universal House of Justice. The endeavor evolved through a process of trial and error, consultation, action, reflection, and readjustment. Proposals considered by the Editorial Board ranged from a one-volume dictionary to an encyclopedia with as many as 15 volumes or as few as two; from a series of fascicles to introductory volumes, grouped by topic, as a step toward producing an A-Z encyclopedia. Meanwhile, dramatic changes in publishing and information technology were making further consultation and reassessment imperative.

In December 2006, the Universal House of Justice approved a proposal to post online an interim selection of articles, to which new material would be added while development of the Encyclopedia (in a format still to be determined) continued. In late 2008, with the Encyclopedia website nearing completion, the National Assembly, responding to the Great Recession,

decided to reorganize the project to reduce expenditures. Since then, the project has relied on volunteer service, with earmarked contributions enabling limited editorial and administrative work. Thus the continuation of the project since 2009 has depended primarily on the generous support of individuals who value it and believe in its potential.

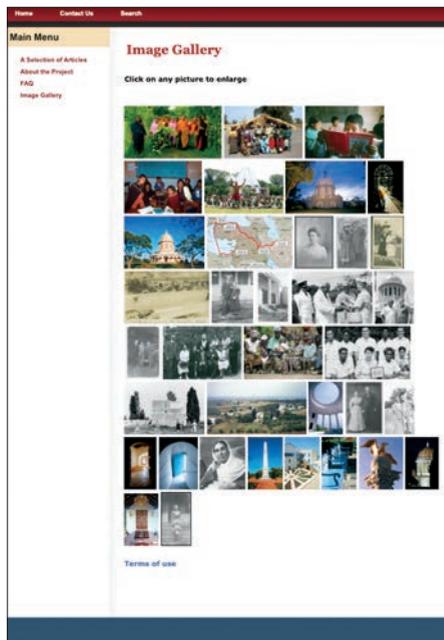
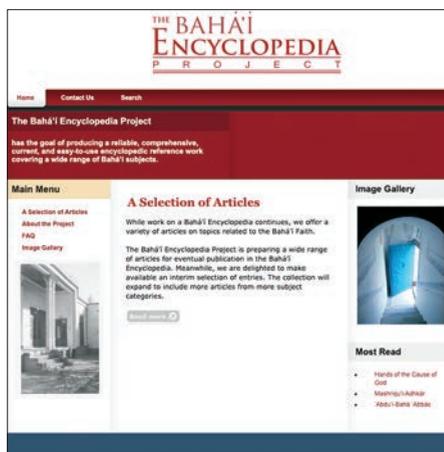
The Encyclopedia Project website offers a sampling of detailed, meticulously researched, signed, and illustrated articles. Reflecting increased Internet use during the pandemic, the number of both website users and users' page views more than doubled in April 2020 and remained high, at times peaking even higher during the remainder of the year. Most visitors, about 85 percent, are new to the site. The majority come from the United States, but in 2020 the number of international visitors increased by about 10 percentage points, to 44 percent. Lingering technical difficulties, first reported in 2012, have affected some of the website's original features and have prevented new articles and updates from being posted. However, the website has remained functional, with the exception of a security issue in late November 2020 that was soon resolved.

The ranking of most-read articles shifted somewhat in 2020, possibly reflecting the interests of new visitors. "Hands of the Cause of God" by Eunice Braun and the editors has consistently been either the first- or second-most widely read article every year. It

was first this year. “Dunn, Clara, and Dunn, John Henry Hyde” by Graham Hassall attracted more than twice as many viewers as last year and became the second-most widely read article. “Letters of the Living” by the editors, last year’s most read, was third this year. “Mashriqu’l-Adhkár” by Julie Badiée and the editors, always among the most read, ranked fourth even as it attracted 50 percent more readers than last year. Biographical accounts were also widely read; “Gregory, Louis George” by Gayle Morrison, “Yaḥyá, Mírzá” by Moojan Momen, and “Chase, Thornton” by Robert H. Stockman ranked among the eight articles with the highest numbers of page views.

Throughout the Five Year Plan, anecdotes shared by readers have indicated that Encyclopedia articles serve as a resource for study-circle participants. Moreover, as a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice in 2008 states, “Far from being a diversion from the worldwide effort to advance the process of entry by troops, scholarship can be a powerful reinforcement to that endeavour and a valuable source of new enquirers.”

The Encyclopedia Project welcomes comments and inquiries (at encyclopedia@usbnc.org), encourages visits to its website (at www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org), and looks forward to remaining a useful resource for many years to come.



Throughout the Five Year Plan, anecdotes shared by readers have indicated that Encyclopedia articles serve as a resource for study-circle participants.



While still a temporary measure, pre-publication review continues to ensure that works produced by Bahá'í authors and artists represent the Bahá'í Faith accurately and with dignity.

Office of Review

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

While still a temporary measure, pre-publication review continues to ensure that works produced by Bahá'í authors and artists represent the Bahá'í Faith accurately and with dignity. A third criterion is timeliness—whether a work may endanger the friends in countries where they face persecution or be unwise to distribute for other reasons.

The review of literature and audiovisual materials (including films and music) is carried out by the Office of Review in collaboration with a growing network of reviewers around the country. Local Spiritual Assemblies are responsible for reviewing literature that is for local use only, as well as all "special materials" (such as artwork and graphic creations, greeting cards, jewelry, and T-shirts) produced by individuals in their jurisdiction, whether intended for local or national distribution. Publication of certain translations and historical documents is subject to additional protective approval requirements at the international level.

In general, the policy of review does not apply to the Internet medium, particularly

personal Web pages and blogs, where content is amenable to easy change and revision, individual initiative is strongly encouraged, and learning through trial and error is valued. In the case of more formal online undertakings, such as e-books or articles in online journals with institutional sponsorship, the policy of review continues to apply.

A learning process

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

The expanding, open-ended network of reviewers consists primarily of authors and artists who have themselves submitted materials for review, thus continually building our collective capacity as a community to uphold the review standards for accuracy and dignity across a wide diversity of fields. Authors are frequently asked to recommend reviewers, and in some cases reviewers and authors may choose to consult with each other directly. The Review Office fosters this learning process and continues to address new questions in consultation with authors,

artists, and reviewers, and in accordance with the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Systems and statistics

The Review Office received 167 submissions during the year 2020–21, an increase of 18 percent over the previous year. All submissions are received in electronic form. Roughly 90 percent of submissions are literature; the rest are audiovisual materials. The wide variety of items reviewed includes articles, chapters, nonfiction books, novels, encyclopedia entries, songs, poems, films, DVDs, CDs, children’s materials, study guides, scripts, pamphlets, and sheet music.

Authors and artists are generally asked to allow about 12 weeks for review of a book, eight weeks for an article, and four weeks for a CD. Many reviews are completed more quickly, though some require longer, depending on the length and complexity of the work and the availability of reviewers. In addition to reviewing new cases, the Office responds to a steady stream of general correspondence, specific inquiries, and resubmissions.

The diversity, range, and depth of materials being created by Bahá’í authors and artists includes work intended to contribute directly or indirectly to the community-building work of the Bahá’í community; to spiritual transformation; to public and academic discourse; and to informing new approaches to social action. It is a privilege to witness the creativity and devotion inspired by the message of Bahá’u’lláh, as expressed by the talented and dedicated believers with which this national Bahá’í community is blessed.

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Office of Operations

The Office of Operations coordinates business activities that support the vision, goals, and work of the National Spiritual Assembly and its subordinate offices and agencies. Its principal purpose is to ensure the organizational coherence and successful functioning of the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO). Toward this end, the Chief Operations Officer (COO) accompanies managers, consultants, and strategic and operational task forces and committees. Central aims are to foster continuous improvement in interoffice communication, collaboration, organizational governance, and resource management.

Evolution of the Office and areas of focus

Since its creation in 2012, the functions of the Office have evolved in accordance with the guidance of the National Assembly and the learning continuously generated by BNO operations. Each step is taken with a certain milestone in mind related to objectives of the Office's mission and purpose, and with an eye to both contributing to the advancement of the organization and fulfilling the goals of the Five Year Plan.

The Office coordinates the work of key BNO staff and expert external resources, including Bahá'í-owned business, to advance a few lines of focused action, including the following:

- Facilitating independent quality assessment for the organization, utilizing expert resources with deep understanding of the institute process.
- Identifying information technology systems and applications that can support critical needs of the growing community and ensuring effective utilization of those systems.

In all its lines of action, the Office strives to maintain a service-minded focus, a creative sensibility, and utmost respect for the sacrificial contributions of the Bahá'í

community always mindful of preserving or creating environments that foster effective service by staff and volunteers. Nearly every line of action taken is either in collaboration with or in support of other departments and with members of the BNO staff.

The Office registered progress in the following areas during 2020–21:

Online Contribution System (OCS)

Since March 2020, OCS, the application enabling individuals and institutions to contribute via the Internet to the National Bahá'í Fund and associated Funds, has undergone major organizational and structural changes. A new development team, which includes some of the developers who worked on earlier versions, has contributed high-quality work on the path toward a much-anticipated OCS 5.0, which is undergoing final testing. The new version offers a complete overhaul of its interface with users and is compatible with tablets and smartphones as well as desktop and laptop computers. Its release is projected for early summer 2021.

Further envisioned as a feature of OCS is a module to support auditing of local Bahá'í Funds. The Office of Operations and that of the Treasurer are gathering requirements for development of such a module, which would allow auditors—whether Bahá'ís or not—to log in and conduct an audit of local finances annually. Potential advantages include greater efficiency, greater accuracy, and a secure and permanent location for all audit records.

Huqúqu'lláh Payment System

Revision of the online Huqúqu'lláh Payment System is underway, and it will be compatible with the same array of devices as the new OCS. Its release is anticipated in late summer 2021.

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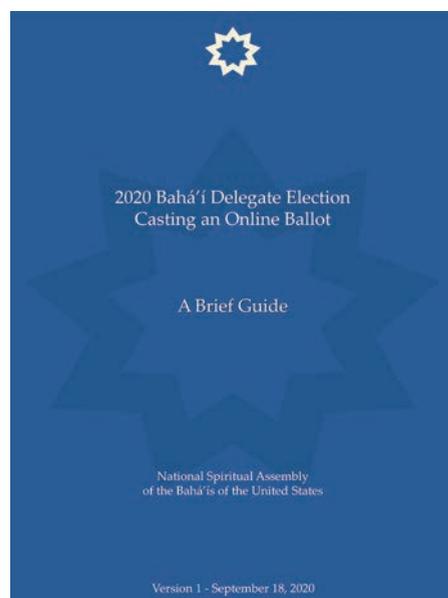
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A new development team, which includes some of the developers who worked on earlier versions, has contributed high-quality work on the path toward a much-anticipated new version of the Online Contribution System, which is undergoing final testing. Its release is projected for early summer 2021.

Development continues on the Inquiry Management System, to more efficiently serve the needs of those responding to people who inquire about the Faith through such avenues as the national website, the 800-22UNITE phone line, or the House of Worship.



Online Balloting System (OBS)

The development of OBS gained urgency from the challenges imposed by the pandemic. Thanks to an external development team collaborating tirelessly with the Office of the Secretary and other BNO staff members, OBS was in place in fall 2020 for our national community's first-ever online Bahá'í elections: that of the delegates designated to elect the National Spiritual Assembly in 2021, and that of the members of the 12 Regional Bahá'í Councils. Since its development began in 2019, the underlying vision for OBS has always been to offer a universal balloting solution that can be utilized anywhere in the world to elect National or Local Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Councils, or National Convention delegates. High expectations precede its use in elections nationwide during Rıdván 2021.

Inquiry Management System (IMS)

Development continues for this platform to more efficiently serve the needs of those responding to people who inquire about the Faith through such

avenues as the national website, the 800-22UNITE phone line, or the House of Worship. A talented external team is collaborating with BNO offices and Regional Councils to produce a system usable by first-level responders, Area Teaching Committees, Regional Training Institutes, and Regional Bahá'í Councils. It is being designed to replace the Seeker Response System, which has served our community for many years but is now largely outdated.

Bahá'í Bookstore Mobile App

In partnership with the Bahá'í Publishing Trust and Bahá'í Distribution Service, an external development team has developed and launched a Bahá'í Bookstore e-commerce application, available for both iOS and Android devices.

Regional Training Institute facilities

As the number of clusters at the third milestone of growth increases, the need to secure physical facilities for Regional Training Institutes grows correspondingly. The Operations Office has been supporting various Regional Councils in their efforts to acquire facilities.

Reflections

The Office is looking ahead at a number of possibilities, with the common theme of leveraging a collaborative mode of operations to continually deliver greater value to the National Assembly and to the BNO. Continuing its conversations with the organization's offices and departments and with members of the national community is essential to the Office's work. While mindful of the wisdom of allowing things to develop organically, the Office continues to assess current operations, to anticipate needs, and to develop initiatives that build capacity and deliver measurable results that are simple, scalable, and sustainable.

Office of Information Technology

The Office of Information Technology (IT) provides email services, file and print services, local and long-distance telephone services, Help Desk support, reporting services, and support for a number of enterprise applications for the offices and agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly, Local Spiritual Assemblies, registered Bahá'í groups, individual believers, and seekers.

The IT team's accomplishments during 2020–21 include the following:

Mobile app

The Bahai.us mobile app provides a set of online tools that allow American believers to independently manage a number of important facets of their Bahá'í community life, such as address changes and contact information updates. Believers can also use the app to access guidance from the Universal House of Justice and the National Spiritual Assembly, along with their virtual Bahá'í ID cards.

A unified communication platform

The IT team this year replaced the aging phone system used by the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) with a cloud-based, unified communication platform called Fuze. Fuze combines the functions of telephone, digital messaging, videoconferencing, and remote file sharing in a single system. This gives the BNO staff flexibility and will empower them to continue to work remotely for the duration of the pandemic. The enhanced functionality also allows staff to respond to community inquiries more quickly and improves the callers' experience. In addition, the system reduces the overall infrastructure, administration,

and maintenance costs borne by the BNO.

Network security and disaster recovery

The IT team increased the network bandwidth and resilience of the Evanston-Wilmette campus, while reducing operational costs. This modification enhanced security while simplifying authentication procedures through the expanded use of cloud-based tools and services. The team also expanded data backup to prepare systems to perform recoveries and maintain business continuity in the event of a disaster. IT was accompanied by the Public Safety department in its initiatives to augment and update the capabilities of BNO security systems.

The IT team also updated the cabling and switching infrastructure at the Bahá'í National Center and several remote offices to enable a more secure environment with greater capacity to support the growing number of technology-dependent initiatives. In addition, it accelerated the adoption and systematization of hybrid cloud platforms and services.

Finally, it upgraded, administered, and customized applications and databases running on the BNO server and at Bahá'í Schools sites, while providing ongoing support.

Web Development Team

The Web Development Team continued to make improvements to the Bahai.us website and mobile app. With an eye toward improving usability and maintainability, it also integrated Bahá'í National Center systems with the Online Balloting System, which is used to cast

The IT team replaced the aging phone system used by the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) with a cloud-based, unified communication platform called Fuze. This system gives the BNO staff flexibility and will empower them to continue to work remotely for the duration of the pandemic.



IT continues to assess how documents flow and are stored in the Bahá'í National Center's database and is in the process of implementing a case management system that will further simplify and enhance the flow of documents and their searchability.

and tally votes in National Convention delegate elections, Regional Bahá'í Council elections, Riḍván Local Spiritual Assembly elections and by-elections in the course of the year.

Working remotely required a number of modifications and changes to applications that improve access and content management. The team also improved Bahá'í Online Security account processes and added more BNO offices to the BNO payment software and enhanced payment options.

The area of reporting and statistics advanced through the increasing use of Power BI, a software system used to produce analytical data for the offices at the BNO and agencies of the National Spiritual Assembly. This enhanced the systemization of outreach efforts to the friends and the greater public.

Office automation and digitization

Last year, the IT team continued efforts to further advance office automation and document digitization. Several years ago, the BNO adopted a new document management system called OnBase. OnBase has significantly improved the work in the Secretariat and the Office of Community Administration. IT continues to assess how documents flow and are stored in the Bahá'í National Center's database and is in the process of implementing a case management system that will further simplify and enhance the flow of documents and their searchability. There have also been design modifications such as a new design configuration in which documents are not dependent upon a Bahá'í community code or a Bahá'í ID number for storage. This will make it possible to search multiple document types for the same subject, person, or community. Further, it will make it easier to organize documents that are not directly associated with communities or individuals.

Persian Bahá'í Media Service Web Team

The Persian Bahá'í Media Service (PBMS) Web Team redesigned its website (at persianbahaimedia.org) to be more adaptive to mobile devices, in response to analytics and user feedback that indicate most of its target audience in Iran accesses content through mobile devices.

In keeping with needs related to the pandemic, the PBMS Web team worked with other IT teams to set up remote workstations utilizing laptops, VPN access, cloud storage, and a home recording studio. The Web team also upgraded *Payam-e-Doost's* streaming radio station platform to run in the cloud, improving sound quality and uptime. The stream is now being rebroadcast through third-party services such as GLWIZ, Tuneiradio.com, Shoutcast, and others.

OFFICE OF MEMBERSHIP AND RECORDS

The Office of Membership and Records, a section of the IT Office, is responsible for maintaining the official records for all Bahá'ís, Local Spiritual Assemblies, and registered groups in the United States Bahá'í community. As part of these duties, the Office:

- Processes enrollments, child registrations, and international transfers into and out of the United States.
- Records contact information and postal addresses, marriages, and verification of deaths.
- Issues welcome letters and instructions on how to access virtual Bahá'í ID cards on the new Mobile App for all new enrollees, youths turning 15, and new arrivals to the US Bahá'í community.
- Captures correspondence sent by individuals and institutions to the National Spiritual Assembly and its various offices and agencies.

- Improves the accuracy of individual addresses stored in the national membership database by using National Change of Address (NCOA) reports produced by the US Postal Service. During 2020–21, the Office updated 3,148 personal addresses using this report as a source.

While several processes have been automated, this year the Office uploaded 17,705 items into the national database. The Office also made 14,521 address or name changes. For statistics on thousands of other transactions, see the “Selected Membership Statistics” table on [page 29](#).

Community education

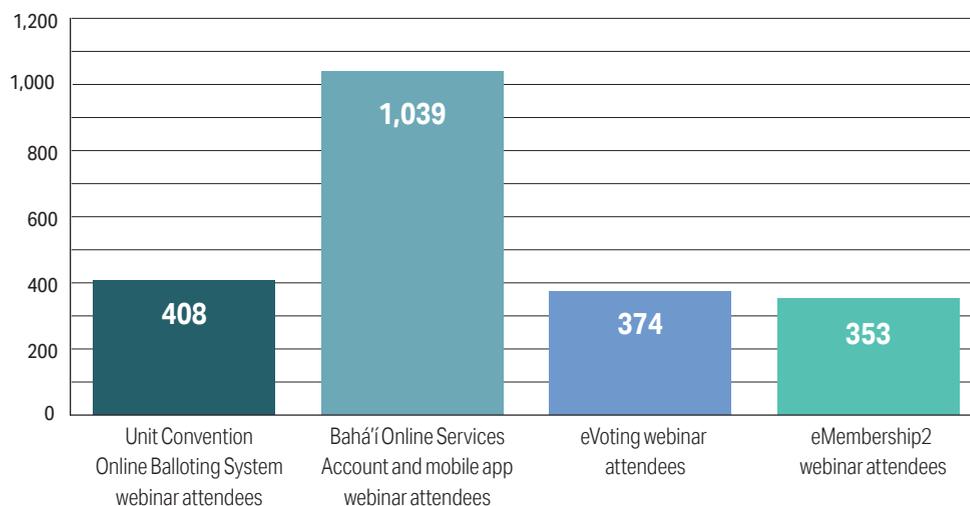
The Office made available the following resources to educate the US Baha’i community on what services it offers and how it can assist local believers with their administrative tasks:

eMembership2 webinars. These webinars introduce Local Spiritual Assemblies to functions within eMembership2, the Assemblies’ portal into

the national membership database. The webinars this year focused on Riḍván elections and the election of officers to Local Spiritual Assemblies. The Office conducted 10 webinars, with 353 individual Local Spiritual Assembly members and registered group officers attending. The webinars educated Assemblies about how to complete tasks such as filling out election-related forms that are submitted to the National Spiritual Assembly via eMembership2.

eVoting webinar and user support. At the beginning of the pandemic and at the National Spiritual Assembly’s request, the Office offered webinars and user support on how to use the online voting platform eVoting for the Riḍván 2020 election of Local Spiritual Assemblies. It conducted six webinars, with 374 individuals attending. Over the course of the year, it continued to offer assistance to those Local Spiritual Assemblies that chose to use the platform for their officer elections and by-elections.

Membership and Records educating the community



While several processes have been automated, this year the Office of Membership and Records uploaded 17,705 items into the national database. The Office also made 14,521 address or name changes.

The Office has most recently been conducting webinars on the Bahá'í Online Services (BOS) Account and the Bahai.us mobile app. The BOS Account allows US Bahá'ís, and a select few from outside the country, to access information and guidance found on the Bahai.us website, the Online Contribution System, My Profile, eMembership2 and the soon-to-be-released Online Balloting System for the upcoming Riḍván 2021 elections.

Online Balloting System (OBS) webinar for delegate elections and Riḍván 2021 elections.

Again, at the National Spiritual Assembly's request, the Office conducted webinars and user support on how to use the Online Balloting System, the platform designated by the National Assembly for use in the fall National Convention delegate elections. It offered five webinars with 408 individuals attending. The Office also provided technical support during the elections and created a training video for tellers and assistant tellers to assist them to carry out their sacred duties. Similar seminars are planned in April 2021 to support local Assemblies in conducting Riḍván elections, as OBS replaces eVoting for that purpose.

Online Balloting System support in Regional Bahá'í Council elections. The Office prepared educational materials and a training video for tellers and assistant tellers using the Online Balloting System in Regional Bahá'í Council elections.

Bahá'í Online Service (BOS) Account and mobile app webinars. The Office has most recently been conducting webinars on the BOS Account and the Bahai.us mobile app. The BOS Account allows US Bahá'ís, and a select few from outside

the country, to access information and guidance found on the www.bahai.us website, the Online Contribution System (OCS), My Profile, eMembership2 and the soon-to-be-released Online Balloting System (OBS) for the upcoming Riḍván 2021 elections.

The Bahai.us mobile app, designed to be download onto a mobile phone, shares many features with the Bahai.us website plus the ability to find contact information for Bahá'í localities while traveling. The app also displays an individual's virtual Bahá'í ID card.

The first of this series of webinars had 1,039 individuals attending over the span of five days.

My Profile

The Office promotes My Profile, which can be accessed through the national website and Bahai.us mobile app, as a tool empowering US Bahá'ís to update their information in the national database and gather information about their local communities. In many phone and email contacts, believers are encouraged to use My Profile, especially new enrollees, believers turning 15, and first-time arrivals in the US Bahá'í national community.

Logistics and Support Services

The Office of Logistics and Support Services has operated since administrative year 2016–17 to assist offices and agencies of the Bahá'í National Organization (BNO) to consolidate and coordinate resources with the goal of achieving greater efficiency and effective cost management. The Office's daily operations include oversight of the Meetings and Events, Mailroom Services, and Front Desk operations at the Bahá'í National Center.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Logistics and Support Services continued its efforts to establish more streamlined procurement functions across the organization, a project that requires coordinating numerous lines of action in collaboration with the Properties, Finance, and Information Technology offices.

Purchasing

A national procurement office is being created to achieve a stronger consolidated purchasing power at lower cost. With the pandemic, major purchases were kept to a minimum, in line with reduced need in many BNO offices and departments. Logistics and Support Services continued efforts to transition to new systems where possible, to streamline remote work purchases.

Meetings and Events

Meetings and Events had an unusually quiet year due to the pandemic, which forced large-scale events to be canceled or postponed indefinitely. In a typical year, Meetings and Events manages logistical details pertaining to events that occur multiple times a year—such as regular meetings of the National Spiritual Assembly, BNO staff reflection gatherings, and Assembly Special Visits; annual events including the Bahá'í National Convention, the Choral

Music Festival, and the Arab American Conference (transitioned to an online platform this year); board meetings and other gatherings serving the US Bahá'í Huqúqu'lláh Trust, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, the Wilmette Institute, the Persian Bahá'í Media Service, and Regional Training Institutes; as well as fundraising events organized by the Office of the Treasurer. During 2020–21, no hospitality services were required for any of these events.

Mailroom Services

During 2020–21, the Mailroom assumed a hybrid role, due to the pandemic and the restrictions it necessitated. It carried on performing many of its regular functions, including a few bulk mail projects that are processed in-house. Custom printing projects from various departments were processed, where feasible, by the Mailroom instead of by printing firms or by third-party vendors, amounting to considerable cost savings.

Front Desk

The Front Desk transitioned to a remote role during 2020–21. The switchboard was operated by staff members from all areas of Logistics and Support Services, with an eye toward achieving a spirit of collaboration.

In the coming year, as the Bahá'í National Center gradually resumes normal operations, Logistics and Support Services will continue to cross-train staff to serve in all four areas: purchasing, Meetings and Events, Mailroom, and Front Desk duties. In this spirit of service, staff will work together to meet the needs of the National Spiritual Assembly and its many offices and agencies.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, Logistics and Support Services continued its efforts to establish more streamlined procurement functions across the organization, a project that requires coordinating numerous lines of action in collaboration with the Properties, Finance, and Information Technology offices.

Properties Office

When the COVID-19 pandemic required closure of the Bahá'í House of Worship, Welcome Center, Foundation Hall, and office buildings of the Bahá'í National Center, the Properties Office took the opportunity to perform needed repairs and improvements.

The Properties Office is responsible for the stewardship of over 250 structures that comprise some 300,000 square feet of occupied space owned by the National Spiritual Assembly, as well as hundreds of acres of grounds and landscapes of historic significance. The Office strives to continuously improve all National Assembly properties through maintenance, repairs, restoration, housekeeping, and landscaping, all employing environmentally sound practices. Properties staff and facilities managers, who come from licensed professional backgrounds, oversee complex maintenance and improvement projects with the goal of creating beautiful and safe environments for prayer, learning, and service.

Response to the pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic required closure of the Bahá'í House of Worship, Welcome Center, Foundation Hall, and office buildings of the Bahá'í National Center, the Properties Office took the opportunity to perform needed repairs and improvements. Custodial staff joined the team of maintenance technicians to perform painting, carpet installation, tile repair and installation, plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, and upholstery. The staff maintained full-time employment during the pandemic by learning new skills and using them to perform essential tasks. With staff completing so many repair projects, savings to the National Bahá'í Fund has been well over \$1 million.

Bahá'í House of Worship

With the House of Worship and Welcome Center closed, the Properties Office undertook much-needed repairs and enhancements throughout the Temple property. A combination of full-time Properties staff and numerous outside contractors completed the following projects in 2020–21:



- Installed a new, sophisticated sound system in the Temple Auditorium that will allow visitors and participants to hear clearly both spoken words and choral music throughout the Auditorium. Sound consultants, audio engineers, and computer programmers designed a system in which speakers remain invisible, providing excellent sound quality without altering the appearance of the historic architecture.





- Completed restoration of the historic wood and fabric seating in the House of Worship Auditorium. Staff volunteered to learn how to accomplish the task, then repaired, refurbished, and reupholstered the more than 1,100 chairs themselves, saving the National Fund over \$300,000.
- Repainted the interior of the Welcome Center.
- Repaired and resealed Temple windows.
- Repaired and installed new tile in the main entrance reflecting pool and fountain.
- Pressure washed and cleaned exterior surfaces of the Temple as well as pathways, stairways, and walkways throughout the property.
- Repaired all 11 fountain pump systems and installed updated electronic controls.
- Performed numerous landscape projects in the gardens, usually in collaboration with outside contractors.
- Installed new bollards and pathway lighting for better security.

Shoreline revetment at Ḥaẓīratu'l-Quds

Historically high lake levels have severely deteriorated shorelines on the 5.5 acre Ḥaẓīratu'l-Quds property, the future home of many National Spiritual Assembly offices and the Assembly's present meeting place. In collaboration with outside maritime engineers and shoreline excavators, the Properties Office oversaw the installation of a needed revetment, which used over 150 truckloads of stone and involved massive excavation and the addition of new drainage systems. The revetment also provides a permanent boundary between the Ḥaẓīratu'l-Quds and adjoining properties.



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Initial construction plans for the new National Bahá'í Archives, which will be located a short distance from the House of Worship, were submitted to governmental agencies for review in March 2021. The new Archives will use the latest equipment and technologies for the safe storage and preservation of its invaluable collections. Pending approvals, construction begins in summer 2021.



Refurbishment of the Bahá'í National Center

The Properties staff has been working daily to repair and refurbish the Bahá'í National Center while staff have been working remotely. To date, Properties staff have performed the following:

- Replaced 22-year-old carpeting with new flooring systems.
- Painted all interior walls.
- Replaced window blinds.
- Replaced suspended ceilings.
- Installed LED light fixtures throughout the building, which will pay for themselves within four years thanks to low energy usage.



- Assisted the Office of Information Technology by installing new phone and data lines throughout the building.
- Constructed three new server rooms.

National Bahá'í Archives

Initial construction plans for the new National Bahá'í Archives, which will be located a short distance from the House of Worship, were submitted to governmental agencies for review in March 2021. The new Archives will use the latest equipment and technologies for the safe storage and preservation of its invaluable collections. Pending approvals, construction begins in summer 2021.

Permanent schools and institutes

In coordination with the Office of Education and Schools, the Properties Office annually lists and prioritizes projects at the permanent Bahá'í Schools and assists in the management and planning of their facilities. The primary focus in 2021 will be to assist the Bosch Bahá'í School staff as facilities are repaired and reconstructed after catastrophic fire damage in 2020.

Residential properties

A long-term plan to purchase properties adjacent to the House of Worship has resulted in the National Spiritual Assembly now owning five neighboring homes and one landscaped parcel. The Properties Office maintains, repairs, and provides all tenant services for the homes and has been able to achieve a 100 percent occupancy rate.

Public Safety

The Public Safety department is staffed by 11 full-time public safety officers, including an operations lieutenant who assists in the day-to-day operations and administration of the department. Officers are responsible for the safety and security of all properties and staff members working at the Bahá'í National Center.

Public Safety is a uniformed service providing 24-hour, seven-day-a-week security. Officers' duties include vehicle and foot patrols of all properties, several times a day. Their friendly and courteous interaction with visitors ensures that all guests appreciate the standards of behavior necessary to maintain the serene spiritual atmosphere that pervades the Bahá'í House of Worship Auditorium and gardens. The department also provides special transportation services. Public Safety, in collaboration with the Information Technology and Properties offices, is completing an upgrade of its access control and surveillance equipment to ensure that a state-of-the-art security system protects Bahá'í properties.

Like other offices and agencies at the National Center, Public Safety had to make adjustments to its operations during 2020–21 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic and associated public health precautions caused them to be canceled, no security services were required for such customary events as Bahá'í National Convention, the Annual Choral Music Festival, or the Staff Picnic on July 4.

The department also adjusted officers' schedules to ensure social distancing in the office space. When more than one

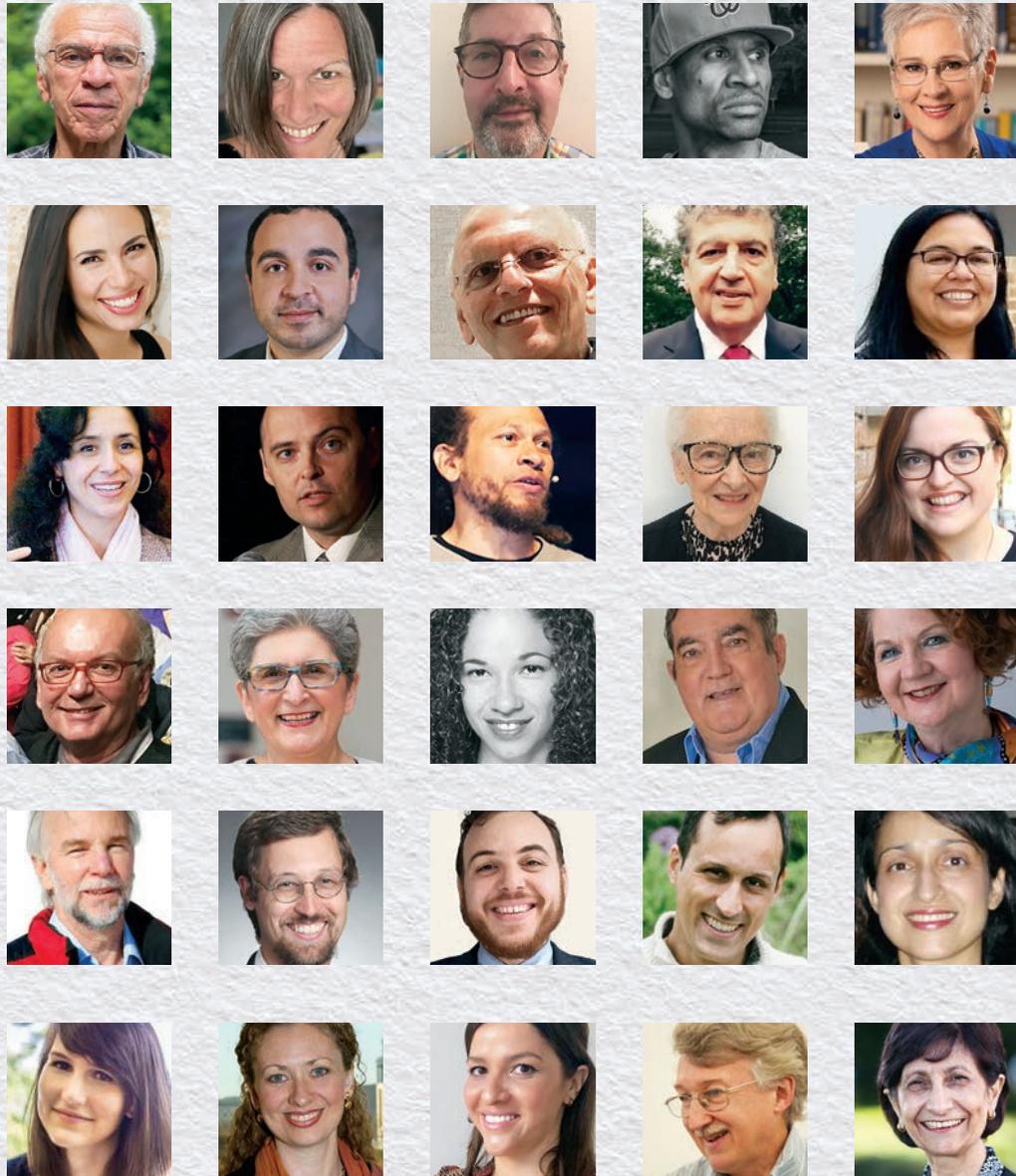


officer was on duty, each operated from a separate building. Public Safety also suspended special transportation services to ensure the safety and well-being of both drivers and passengers, and assisted Human Resources in the effort to maintain social distancing in all National Center office spaces and buildings by limiting the number of employees that could be present in a building at any given time.

Public Safety strives to maintain its professionalism through training. Though the pandemic limited officers' ability to train together, the department will continue to enhance its professionalism through a culture of learning and collaboration with other departments within the Bahá'í National Center and outside agencies.

Public Safety, in collaboration with the Information Technology and Properties offices, is completing an upgrade of its access control and surveillance equipment to ensure that a state-of-the-art security system protects Bahá'í properties.





Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America

The Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America (ABS) is sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada with support from the US National Assembly. Its mission includes helping foster the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community, with particular focus on building the “capacity of the friends to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society in their academic fields and in their professions” in a manner that “enrich[es] the capacity of the Bahá'í community to discharge its mission.”

This focus, set for the Association in guidance from the Universal House of Justice in 2013, has initiated a process of learning and evolution. While the global pandemic seemed initially to be disruptive to its plans, the changes it necessitated have in fact resulted in rich learning and have spurred on the evolution of the Association.

Committee for Collaborative Initiatives

When the 2020 in-person ABS Annual Conference in Dallas was canceled, the Committee for Collaborative Initiatives (CCI) accompanied facilitators in launching some 20 summer reading groups, each focusing on a specific theme within a professional or academic discourse. The groups brought approximately 200 people into thoughtful conversations about key texts. Participants shared their insights and learning processes at the virtual ABS conference, which devoted six online sessions to the reading groups.

Incorporating the summer 2020 experiences of the reading groups and online

gatherings with learning accrued over recent years, the CCI is helping several existing working groups within ABS dedicated to specific fields of work and study to establish cycles of small group activities, including reading groups, punctuated by larger gatherings at the summer conference and late winter seminars. Efforts are also being made to more systematically support group activities in new fields.

Overall, the coherence between CCI-guided efforts and other dimensions of ABS work continues to grow. Members of the CCI contribute in appropriate ways to the planning of the annual conference, including its workshop on contributing to professional and academic discourses.

Evolution of the ABS Annual Conference

The need to conduct the Annual Conference in a virtual space had a transformative effect not only on the conference—held in a series of online sessions from July 24 through August 8—but also on the thinking and working methods of the Association itself. The online format provided a powerful catalyst to respond to the call of the Universal House of Justice for the conference to be “reimagined.” It allowed for new components, such as a Film Festival and poster presentations, and for new methods of facilitating roundtable discussions.

Registration fees were affordable, and sessions could be viewed live or recorded. Thanks to these and other factors, more than 3,000 people attended, far more than at any past conference. A

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The need to conduct the Annual Conference in a virtual space had a transformative effect not only on the conference, but also on the thinking and working methods of the Association itself.

This year also saw the publication of a book under the Association for Bahá'í Studies imprint for the first time in 20 years: *Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change* by Dr. Michael Karlberg. An e-book version of the publication is forthcoming.

significant leap in the Association's information technology capacity was instrumental in carrying the conference out.

Numerous sessions stemmed directly from initiatives fostered by the CCI, as members of working groups, reading groups, and methodology seminars shared insights generated through their participation.

The 2020 conference proved an important milestone in an ongoing cultural transition away from "conference-as-event" and toward a gathering that punctuates an ongoing rhythm of efforts in the arena of intellectual inquiry, diffusing insights from these efforts throughout the community.

Publications

ABS published two issues of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*: Volumes 29.4 and 30.1-2. The *Journal* is [available online](#) without charge, making articles easily accessible and inviting wider participation in scholarly exchange. This year saw the transition of editorial oversight from Dr. John S. Hatcher to Mr. Michael Sabet. The increased technological capacity that facilitated the virtual ABS conference is also moving the *Journal* in line with the highest standards for academic open journals, increasing its discoverability and legitimacy.

This year also saw the publication of a book under the ABS imprint for the first time in 20 years: [*Constructing Social Reality: An Inquiry into the Normative Foundations of Social Change*](#) by Dr. Michael Karlberg. An e-book version of the publication is forthcoming.

Website

ABS redesigned and reconceptualized its [website](#) to serve as a repository of

helpful resources, a source of information about upcoming seminars and initiatives, and an invitation to take initiative and to draw on a growing body of tools and insights emerging from the community's collective experience across diverse fields of interest.

Finances

Operations of the Association are funded primarily through conference fees, with contributions by the National Bahá'í Funds of Canada and the United States.

Association of the Friends of Persian Culture

Background

In 1991, the National Spiritual Assembly's Persian-American Affairs Office established an organization devoted to the promotion of Persian arts and culture. Later, the name of the organization was changed to the [Association of the Friends of Persian Culture](#). The Association is a nonprofit organization operating under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Since the organization's inception, the primary activity of the Association of the Friends of Persian Culture has been the planning and management of its annual conference.

Objectives

The main objectives of the Association are to engage in:

Discourse and dialogue. Among lines of action:

- Strive to make the organization's annual conference a unique occasion for dialogue and substantive discourse with like-minded Iranian individuals, groups, and organizations, as well as people of capacity at every level, on matters of importance to the future of Iran and the welfare of society.
- Help dispel misconceptions about the Bahá'í Faith and continue to build a bridge of love, trust, and understanding with Iranians of every background.
- Seek to stimulate genuine conversation among Iranians of different religions, ethnicities, and ideologies on some of the most challenging issues facing Iran and the world, such as the equality of women and men, human rights, elimination of prejudice, equity and justice, race unity, and the role of religion in society.

Celebration of Iranian culture. Among lines of action:

- Promote and celebrate the diverse facets of Persian arts and culture.
- Provide an opportunity for Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í artists to share their talents with an audience that loves and respects the cultural heritage of Iran.
- Provide an opportunity for Bahá'í children and youth of Iranian descent to become more familiar with and enjoy their cultural heritage.

Community Building and Social Action.

Among lines of action:

- Create an opportunity for conference participants to familiarize themselves with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith as practiced by the worldwide Bahá'í community.
- Provide information about the community-building activities and social action efforts of Bahá'ís throughout the world.
- Provide an opportunity for conference participants to experience first-hand the joyous, courteous, friendly, and inspiring atmosphere of Bahá'í gatherings.
- Further enhance the transformative and unifying spirit of the conference by continually improving the quality of devotionals.

Activities

Annual conference. In 2020, the 30th year of the conference, the Association's Board decided that it would be hosted virtually, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, its spread across the world, and the recommendations of both state and local government and public health authorities. The virtual event was thus broadcast from September 4 through 7 on a variety of Internet platforms.

The four-day conference has had, as of this writing, over 44,000 views on YouTube. On the Facebook platform, it has had over 86,000 views. Over 10,000 households utilizing GLWIZ devices have also accessed the conference, and, finally, the entire conference was broadcast to Iran via Andisheh satellite TV during prime time, with a rebroadcast the next day. Andisheh TV estimates that the conference garnered over five million Iranian households as viewers.

Presentations by a group of eminent Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í Iranian scholars on the general theme of "Glimpses of Persian Culture"—and on the sub-theme of "Constructive Social Change"—were both thought-provoking and inspirational.

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The conference opened with welcoming remarks by Mr. Kenneth E. Bowers, secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly, who also delivered a loving message of welcome from the National Spiritual Assembly to attendees.

Presentations by a group of eminent Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í Iranian scholars on the general theme of "Glimpses of Persian Culture"—and on the sub-theme of "Constructive Social Change"—were both thought-provoking and inspirational. Dr. Firaydoon Javaheri, Dr. Mandana Zandian, Dr. Abbas Milani, Mr. Hamid Rahmanian, Dr. Frank Lewis, Mr. Mozhan Khadem, Ms. Azam Bahrami, Dr. Mina Yazdani, Mr. Shahrouz Tedjarati, Dr. Parham Aghdasi, Mr. Reza Deghati, Mr. Behrouz Jabbari, and Dr. Behrooz Sabet were among speakers.

Artistic performances included poetry and a variety of music. Among the artists performing were Mr. Misagh Zamani, Mr. Behzad Khoshmashrab, Ms. Nadia Sabet, the Daf Ensemble, Mr. Shamim Movahed and Ms. Jinous Yegan, Ms. Sahba Motallebi, Mr. Ahdi Khalili and Mr. Iman Honarpisheh, Mr. Pezhham Akhavass, Ms. Lia Fallah, and Mr. Safa

Shahidi. A select number of artistic performances from past conferences were also included in the program.

Publications and dissemination of conference programs. Video recordings of the entire four-day conference program are available on YouTube and on the Association website (at www.fopca.com/en/archives/video).

Finances

Consistent with its status as a nonprofit corporation, the Association's sources of income include registration fees for the annual conferences, sales of materials, and contributions from individuals. In recent years, the National Spiritual Assembly has provided some financial assistance to ensure the Association is able to maintain the high quality of its programming and event management.

Review and reflection

The Board of Directors of the Association of the Friends of Persian Culture continuously reviews and reflects on both the vision and mission of the Association.

The conference has evolved significantly since its inception, particularly over the past 12 years due to the participation of prominent Iranian non-Bahá'ís, who have joyfully accepted the invitation to present and participate in discourse with Bahá'ís on a variety of subjects. As a result, and in consultation with senior Bahá'í institutions, the Board periodically reviews and refines its vision statement to reflect acquired learning and inspire further growth and development.

Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation

The Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation (BCA) is a nonprofit agency established by the National Spiritual Assembly. Since 2005, its mission has been to support the growth and development of the Faith by providing a systematic program of education, training, and technical assistance to communities whose goal is to lease, purchase, or build Bahá'í Centers, as well as to maintain existing Bahá'í Centers.

BCA continues to offer its assistance to communities for consultation, either in person or by conference call. BCA board members have skills in areas such as property acquisition, fundraising, design and construction, facilities management, financing, accounting, law, architecture, conflict resolution, and nonprofit management.

BCA assists communities as they strive to realize the full potential of their Bahá'í Centers and other properties in support of meeting the goals of the Five Year Plan and advancing the process of entry by troops. BCA's *Technical Assistance Manual* continues to be a useful resource for communities. Its contents include:

- Guidance on leasing, acquiring, and maintaining Bahá'í facilities.
- A blueprint for assessing a community's readiness to operate a Bahá'í Center.
- Helpful advice on planning and organization, fundraising, financing, accounting, legal matters, construction and renovation, and property management.

The *Technical Assistance Manual* may be downloaded from the BCA website at www.bahaicenterassistance.org.

BCA also developed the *Emergency Operations Planning Manual for Local Spiritual Assemblies* as a resource to assist with the operation of properties in the event of an emergency. A third,

updated webinar on "Emergency Operations Planning" was offered in February 2021 to Local Spiritual Assemblies and registered Bahá'í groups that own properties.

In collaboration with the national Office of Information Technology, BCA completed updates to the Bahá'í properties database, including all fields needed to respond to requests for property updates from the Bahá'í World Center's Office for the Development of Administrative Systems (ODAS). The database interfaces with UnityWeb and eMembership2. Local Spiritual Assemblies and groups can add and update information about their facilities in the database, including uploading pictures and ownership documents. BCA is planning a webinar to provide guidance in the use of the properties database. The database will also be used to respond to ODAS requests.

BCA held one virtual board meeting in the last year and 12 meetings by telephone conference call. It also met with the National Assembly's treasurer, Mrs. Juana C. Conrad; with the Bahá'í National Organization's chief operations officer, Mr. Soheil Soheil; and with other offices at the Bahá'í National Center.

BCA consulted with the Regional Bahá'í Council of the Southeastern States, Auxiliary Board members, and the relevant Local Spiritual Assembly during the acquisition and setup of one institutional facility. It consulted with nine communities in total, either in person or by telephone conferencing, and responded to inquiries from four more communities and individuals.

More information on the Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation is available on its website (www.bahaicenterassistance.org). BCA can also be contacted via email (info@bahaicenterassistance.org), telephone (847-425-7940), or surface mail (Bahá'í Center Assistance, 1233 Central St., Evanston IL 60201-1611).

In collaboration with the Office of Information Technology at the Bahá'í National Center, the Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation completed updates to the Bahá'í properties database, including all fields needed to respond to the Bahá'í World Center's Office for the Development of Administrative Systems.

Online gatherings in May 2020 and February 2021 brought the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force into contact with more individuals who are either Deaf, trained ASL interpreters, or want to be involved in future initiatives; thus, there is a growing group of collaborators in this important work.

Bahá'í Service for the Blind

During the past year, the Bahá'í Service for the Blind continued with its primary responsibility to provide the literature of the Faith in various media formats to those who are unable to use normal print due to a disability. The three formats currently available through the Service are Braille, MP3 audio recordings, and large print.

The Service this year added two MP3 audio recordings, 23 new Braille titles, and seven large print items. Through sales or free uploads, it made available 34 large print books, 16 audiobooks, and 65 Braille books. In addition to the

United States, the Service again provided materials to individuals in Canada, New Zealand, and Wales.

The Service makes a lending library of audio and Braille materials available to Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís alike. The Service also provides, at no charge, *The American Bahá'í* in MP3 format to those who need it.

The work of the Service is done entirely by volunteers. The Service's website (www.BahaiServiceForTheBlind.org) provides information about its work and an up-to-date listing of all available materials.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force

In 2017, the National Spiritual Assembly appointed the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force to address the needs of the Deaf and hard of hearing community, and it has been particularly active over the past year. The Task Force is carrying forward efforts begun over 30 years ago, with the National Assembly's appointment of the first committee entrusted with this objective. Following a devotional facilitated by the Task Force in May 2020 that was fully accessible to friends who are either Deaf or hard of hearing, its members began a process of consultation and reflection with staff of the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette regarding how the Temple's daily devotions, currently held on the Zoom platform, could be made accessible. Months of collaboration culminated in the Task Force facilitating, on February 20 of this year, a program of prayer during the Temple's daily devotions that employed closed captioning and American Sign Language (ASL).

The gatherings in May 2020 and February 2021 brought the Task Force into contact with more individuals who are either Deaf, trained ASL interpreters, or want to be involved in future initiatives; thus, there is a growing group of collaborators in this important work.

The Task Force has many ambitious goals, both short and long-term, and will continue to work closely with the National Assembly—which also receives relevant guidance from the Universal House of Justice—in pursuit of the aim of the Plans, while striving to empower a population whose intimate association with the Faith has often been hindered by accessibility issues.

Anyone interested in learning of other activities being organized by the Deaf and hard of hearing community, including certified ASL interpreters, is welcome to reach out to the Task Force (at Bahai.Deaf@gmail.com) to be included in its regular communications.

Health for Humanity

Health for Humanity seeks to inspire and motivate both local communities and global resources to improve health through the execution, in various settings, of medical service, clinical training, and health education projects.

The organization continues to be inspired and assisted by guidance from the Bahá'í World Center on the most effective methods of social and economic development, and aims to serve as an instrument through which the health of people everywhere can, ultimately, be improved.

Now in its 29th year, Health for Humanity continues its efforts to advance discourse in the broader health community on health, and, through medical service and health education initiatives, on social action.

Board and staff strive to strengthen institutional capacity via:

- administrative and financial development
- improved Web and social media presence
- systematic contact with members of like-minded organizations
- exploration of strategic support to health-related Bahá'í community youth projects
- contributions to discourse on health for future Bahá'í generations
- development of potential pathways for Health for Humanity members to conduct service in the health care arena

Over the past year, Health for Humanity has focused its energies on discovering practicable ways to serve as a leavening catalyst to strategic grassroots health care and health promotion projects, especially among Blacks, Indigenous peoples, and people of color, as well as refugee communities. One project—named “Life Skills for the Young Lakota” (LSYL)—was created by Oceti Wakan, a nonprofit organization on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, and implemented by the Oglala County School District. This multiyear life skills curriculum spans and integrates the spheres of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being. LSYL has reached almost 2,000 kindergarten-through-grade-8 Lakota children in South Dakota public schools this academic year.

One project—named “Life Skills for the Young Lakota” (LSYL)—was created by Oceti Wakan, a nonprofit organization on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, and implemented by the Oglala County School District. This multiyear life skills curriculum spans and integrates the spheres of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being. LSYL has reached almost 2,000 kindergarten-through-grade-8 Lakota children in South Dakota public schools this academic year.



Annual Report of the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace, University of Maryland

In the midst of the pandemic, the Bahá'í Chair shifted to an online environment—as did the University of Maryland as a whole—and adapted its slate of events to digital platforms. The Chair hosted an array of speakers, scholars, and researchers from around the globe dedicated to the betterment of our world. In varied ways, they suggested that the defense of truth is defense indeed, and requires a full-throated, martial thoughtfulness. Their concerned, intellectual, and tenacious spirit reminded us that the struggle to maintain what is special, sacred, pure, and true is continuous and requires perseverance. At its best, it is a spirit that is other-focused, self-sacrificing, and rooted in the attempt at long-term structural improvement.

The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD), is an academic program endowed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and dedicated to advancing interdisciplinary study and discourse on global peace. The mission of the Bahá'í Chair, as described in its founding documents in 1993, is “to initiate public forums for discussing the issues proposed in the Statement of the Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*.” The contents of this statement provide the guiding charter for the work carried out by the Bahá'í Chair.

In 2020, the Chair held 11 lectures, cosponsored three symposia, and held two book launch discussions. More than 1,000 people attended these events on campus and online, and 12,300 viewers around the world saw them on The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace [YouTube channel](#). Chair events have been attended by more than 6,000 and viewed online by over 54,000 since 2013, when the Chair, with Dr. Hoda Mahmoudi as

its incumbent, implemented a mission of promoting the vision for world peace through an intensive learning process focused on five central themes:

- Structural racism and the root causes of prejudice
- Human nature
- Empowerment of women and peace
- Frontiers of global governance and leadership
- Overcoming challenges in the globalization of the environment

Lectures and symposia

The Bahá'í Chair held the following lectures and symposia during the academic year 2020–21. Event videos are posted online (at <http://bahaichair.umd.edu/>).

- Two discussions with Dr. Mahmoudi and Dr. Janet Khan were held to launch their book [A World Without War](#). They were moderated by Dr. Tiffani Betts Razavi on July 17, 2020, and by Mr. Vafa Valapour on July 25.
- Dr. Aurelien Mondon and Dr. Aaron Winter discussed their book [Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream](#) on September 3.
- The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace Annual Lecture, “[A Conversation on Climate Science, Policy, and Justice](#)” on September 17, featured Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, an expert on climate change and the intersection between justice and ecology.
- The Chair cosponsored “[A Discussion on the First United States Commission on Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation](#)” on September 21 as part of the John B. Slaughter Virtual Reparations Conversation Series.

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The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace Annual Lecture, “A Conversation on Climate Science, Policy, and Justice” on September 17, featured Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, an expert on climate change and the intersection between justice and ecology.

In 2020, the Chair published *A World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace*, by Dr. Hoda Mahmoudi and Dr. Janet Khan.

- The 6th UMD Symposium on Environmental Justice and Health Disparities, with the Chair's cosponsorship, took place September 26.
- Dr. Jeffrey Herf presented "[The Three Faces of Anti-Semitism](#)" on October 6, outlining how "the longest hatred" endures today.
- Dr. Hollie Nyseth Brehm, associate professor of sociology and criminology at Ohio State University, on October 29 presented her research on "[Reentry and Reintegration of People Convicted of Genocide in Rwanda](#)."
- On November 17, the Chair co-sponsored the symposium "Global Models of Reparations," another element of the John B. Slaughter Series.
- Dr. Joseph Richardson Jr., Joel and Kim Feller Endowed Professor and acting chair for African American studies at UMD, gave a November 24 presentation on "[Life After the Gunshot: A Digital Storytelling Project on the Impact of Structural and Interpersonal Violence and the Healing Process for Young Black Men](#)."
- Dr. Arie Kruglanski, distinguished professor of psychology at UMD, and his research team on January 12, 2021, gave the presentation "[Syrian Refugees in the Middle East and in Europe: On the Psychology of a Humanitarian Challenge](#)."
- Dr. Stephen B. Thomas, professor of health policy and management and director of the Maryland Center for Health Equity, gave the lecture "[The Colors of Covid-19: Confronting Health Disparities During a Global Pandemic](#)" on February 26.
- Dr. Alice Evans, lecturer at King's College London, on March 2 gave the presentation "[What thwarts and enables feminist activism around the world?](#)"
- Dr. Sarai Aharoni, lecturer in the Gender Studies Program at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, spoke

about her research on "[Sharing the burden: Archival traces of Israeli women's peace activism](#)" on March 30.

- **Scheduled for April 6:** "Global Health Inequalities and the Pandemic," a presentation by Dr. Devi Sridhar, professor and holder of the Chair of Global Public Health at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.
- **Scheduled for April 27:** "[Decoloniality, Ontology and the Structure of Racism](#)," a presentation by Dr. Everisto Benyera, associate professor of African politics in the Department of Political Science, University of South Africa, Pretoria.

Publications

In 2020, the Chair published:

- [A World Without War: 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Discourse for Global Peace](#), by Dr. Hoda Mahmoudi and Dr. Janet Khan.
- "Peace is Everything: An Examination of the Bahá'í Faith's Concept of Peace," an article by Dr. Mahmoudi in the journal *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte (Journal of Religious and Cultural Studies)*, Volume 72: Issue 3, June 2020.

Other events

In November, Dr. Mahmoudi participated in "The Connecting Line: Secular and Religious Narratives in the Bahá'í Conception of the World," a virtual event at the University of Haifa, Israel, co-sponsored by the Bahá'í World Center.

In December, Dr. Mahmoudi participated in "Climate Action for Peace: Spiritual Dimensions," a panel discussion broadcast online as part of the [Welcome to WE Show](#) online series.

Appendix:

Membership of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, 2020–2021

Muin Afnani
Fariba Aghdasi
Kenneth E. Bowers, *Secretary*

Juana C. Conrad, *Treasurer*
Robert C. Henderson
Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, *Vice Chair*

Rabi Musah
Kevin Trotter
David F. Young, *Chair*

Membership of the Regional Bahá'í Councils in the United States

Appalachian States

Ntianu Bullock
Aram Ferdowsi, *Chair*
Niaz Khadem, *Vice Chair*
Laura Alison McGee
Elizabeth Price, *Secretary*
Bitra Rahmanian, *Treasurer*
Stephen Tabe

Atlantic States

Taraneh Akhavan, *Assistant Treasurer*
Tod Ewing
Jerome Green, *Secretary*
Navid Haghighi, *Vice Chair*
Eric Johnson
Behzad Mazloom
Nelufar Mohajeri, *Chair*
Peter Oldziej, *Treasurer*
Corinne Perry

State of California

Cynthia Adlparvar, *Chair*
Payam Adlparvar
Farzin Aghdasi, *Secretary*
Jeffrey Albert
Samir Delchad, *Vice Chair*
Randolph Dobbs
Chitra Golestani-Maghzi
Charleen Maghzi-Ader,
Recording Secretary
Sana Rezaei, *Treasurer*

Four Corners States

Douglas Allen, *Chair*
Jerry Bathke
Carol Brooks
Gregory Hatayama
Jennifer North Morris, *Secretary*
Julianne Redson-Smith, *Treasurer*
Jan Saeed
Soheila Shahidi
Timothy Wood, *Recording Secretary*

Heartland States

Nadia Ayoubzadeh, *Chair*
Dianne Bohannon-Letzer, *Treasurer*
George Davis, *Secretary*
Hoda Kemp
Steven Lonning, *Recording Secretary*
Rebecca Rice, *Vice Chair*
Elma Strom

Midwestern States

David Douglas, *Secretary*
Meghan McCullough, *Vice Chair*
Marylou Miller, *Recording Secretary*
Tucker Myers
Karen Pollock, *Chair*
Roi Qualls, *Treasurer*
Oliver Thomas

Northeastern States

Nader Anvari
Tabassom Anvari, *Vice Chair*
Carey Corea
Nina Dini, *Assistant Secretary*
Marie McNair, *Secretary*
Joel Nizin, *Treasurer*
Vickie Nizin
Michael Penn, *Chair*
Frank Robinson Jr.

Northern Plains States

Fitzgerald Clark, *Chair*
Stacey Firestone
Margaret Dru Hanich, *Secretary*
Mondana Heern, *Treasurer*
Serge Van Neck

Northwestern States

Mauricio Brizuela
Henri Cross, *Recording Secretary*
Adel Faridani, *Chair*
Todd Kutches
Lonnie Locke
Omid Meshkin, *Treasurer*
David Simmons, *Assistant Secretary*
Erica Toussaint-Brock, *Secretary*
Elahe Vahdat Young, *Vice Chair*

Prairie States

Vicki Abel
Solomon Atkins, *Secretary*
Susan Bishop
Chad Dumas
Marcia Gitchell, *Treasurer*
Sahba Jalali
Billie Mayo, *Chair*
Martha Rabbani, *Vice Chair*
Mark Scheffer, *Recording Secretary*

South Central States

Allison Ashley
Susan Hansen, *Chair*
Fereidoun Homayoun
Sandy Huening
Bahram Jalalizadeh
Nadia Moayyad, *Vice Chair*
Regina Rafrat, *Secretary*
Sina Sabet Sarvestani,
Recording Secretary
Mark Sherrill, *Treasurer*

Southeastern States

Linda Ahdieh Grant, *Secretary*
Danita Brown
Riaz Khadem
Gregory Kintz, *Vice Chair*
Nabil Kleinhenz, *Assistant Secretary*
Akwanza Mangum, *Chair*
Michael O'Neal
Andrea Perkins, *Recording Secretary*
Hooman Rafiee, *Treasurer*

Appendix:

Membership of key consultative and directorial bodies

Temple Board (for the Wilmette Bahá'í House of Worship)

Matthew Alan Cotton Jr.
George E. Davis, *Temple Director*
Mark Vafa Eghrari
Elizabeth Ortiz Estrada
Jordan Van Rijn

Wilmette Institute Executive Committee

Jeffrey Albert
Chitra Golestani-Maghzi
Robert Stockman, *Director*

Wilmette Institute Academic Advisory Board

Erin Murphy-Graham
Michael L. Penn
Derik Smith
June Manning Thomas

Financial Advisors Task Force

Douglas Henck
Grant Kvalheim
Adam Ludwin
Cary M. Maguire Jr.
Stephen Vaccaro

National Properties Advisory Task Force

Brad La Rue
Marcus Reese McKerley

Affiliates' boards and committees

Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America Executive Committee

Mariam Ashtiani
Julia Berger, *Secretary*
Shabnam Koirala-Azad, *Chair*
Jasmine Miller-Kleinhenz
Andres Shahidinejad, *Treasurer*
Derik Smith, *Deputy Treasurer*
Todd Smith, *Vice Chair*

Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America Committee for Collaborative Initiatives

Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi
Geoffrey Cameron
Eric Farr
Michael Karlberg
Martha Schweitz

Journal of Bahá'í Studies Editorial Committee

Ann Boyles
Roshan Danesh
Nilufar Gordon, *Editorial Coordinator*
John Hatcher, *Editor Emeritus*
Pierre-Yves Mocquais
Michael Sabet, *Editor*
Bahhaj Taherzadeh
Peter Murphy, *Poetry Editor*

Association of the Friends of Persian Culture Board of Directors

Nooshin Agahi
Guitty Ejtemai
Hermien Hoveydai
Jaleh Joubine-Khadem
Omid Milani
Kambiz Mobini
Gita Nabili
Fuad Ziai

Bahá'í Center Assistance Corporation Board

Carl D. Clingenpeel, *Secretary*
Sharon Dixon-Peay
Farzad Ferdowsi
Ronald Lillejord, *Treasurer*
Clifford A. Luxion
Kerry L. Jones Mogharebi
Lee Ratcliff, *Chair*

Bahá'í Service for the Blind Committee

Robert Dickson
Bill Peary
Margaret Tash

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Task Force

Tavoria Rae Kellam-Lawrence
V. Naledi Raspberry, *Convener*
Jason Eli Schwartz

Health for Humanity Board of Directors

Jon Bruss
Babak Etemad
Gity Etemad
William McMiller, *Vice Chair*
John Safapour, *Secretary*
Geoffrey Wilson, *Chair and Treasurer*

Persian Bahá'í Media Service Fund Development Group

Vida Aghdasi
Taraneh Darabi
Fariba Talebi Eghaneyan
Foad Haghghi
Neda Najibi
Sana Rouhani
Gouya Zamani

Releasing the potential of youth—US statistics

In the conversation about community building

4,621

Entered the institute process

730

Currently involved in conducting a core activity

1,538

Currently encouraging others in their service

499

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