

Advancing the Plans for the Bicentenary in Vancouver

As the community rapidly approaches the celebration of the first of the two Bicentenaries to be celebrated during the current Five Year Plan, the Local Assembly has received a series of heart-warming questions and encouraging stories from across the community, and indeed the globe, regarding the planning of these events, which demonstrate how eager and engaged the community is in the process of reaching out to seven thousand souls at these celebrations.

Friends, we have the guidance from our beloved institutions. We have lists. We have the engine of growth that is the institute process. We have less than three months to put it all into practice. Now is the time to act! Crucial to the success of our individual efforts is a collective undertaking in teams, in order that we can support each other. We hope that teams and families will be able to study this guidance together, and help further advance the planning already underway in each of the nine feast areas to reach even greater numbers through their network of friends and families.

Guidance from Universal House of Justice and National Spiritual Assembly of Canada

The Period of Special potency

The signs could hardly be more promising, then, for what the coming year might bring. And what could be more fitting to offer the Blessed Beauty on the two hundredth anniversary of His Birth than the earnest striving of His loved ones to extend the reach of His Faith? The first of the two bicentenaries to be celebrated by the Bahá'í world is thus an occasion with prospects most thrilling. **Viewed aright, this year presents the single greatest worldwide opportunity there has ever been for connecting hearts to Bahá'u'lláh. In the months ahead, let all be mindful of this precious chance and alert to the possibilities that exist in every space for acquainting others with His life and sublime mission. For the teaching opportunity that is now before the Bahá'í world to be seized to its fullest extent, creative thought needs to be given to the conversations that could unfold with every kind of person.** (Ridván Message 2017, the Universal House of Justice)

During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. **These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá'ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation, a Manifestation of God, was born to the world.** Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá'í identity. (29 December 2015, Letter from the Universal House of Justice)

Locus at Local Level

The locus of activity for the bicentenaries is to be at the local level. The House of Justice anticipates that in countless places across the world, both rural settings and urban centres,

the friends will find creative ways to honour the Twin Manifestations Whose lives and sacred missions will be recalled on Their anniversaries. There might also be an opportunity for initiatives at the national level, which could include a gathering to which dignitaries and prominent individuals who have a relationship with the Faith could be invited. **But the most distinguishing feature of these bicentenaries will be a tremendous flourishing of activity by Bahá'ís and their friends in local communities.** (18 May 2016, Letter from the Universal House of Justice)

Using Entire 48 Hours

It should be noted that, although each anniversary is associated primarily with just one of the Manifestations, **in each case the celebrations ought to encompass both of the Twin Birthdays,** and events may be spread out **across the full length of the two days.** (18 May 2016, Letter from the Universal House of Justice)

The implications of these developments for the approaching two-hundredth anniversary celebrations of the Births of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, the first of which is next year, are striking. From the stories we have heard, the profound change of culture described in recent messages of the Universal House of Justice is gaining strength in Canada and affecting the manner of celebration of Holy Days. **Two-day festivals have included eloquent talks and formal programmes, sunrise devotional gatherings and pancake breakfasts, community hikes and service projects, neighbourhood visiting campaigns and intimate family dinners with friends. In all these spaces the subject of conversation was the appearance of these “two Luminaries that rose successively over the horizon of the world”.** The capacity to invite and welcome, developed especially through the flourishing of devotional gatherings over the last two years, has in some communities engaged an equal number of Bahá'ís and their friends in celebrating together over the two-day period. (21 November 2016, Letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada to the Friends gathered at the Feast of Speech)

Dignitaries and Leaders

There might also be an opportunity for initiatives at the national level, which could include a gathering to which dignitaries and prominent individuals **who have a relationship with the Faith** could be invited. (18 May 2016, Letter from the Universal House of Justice)

Working with lists

At this Feast of Speech, then, we challenge all believers to reflect on the call of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the prayer for Canada to “loose their tongues”, and think of ways they will participate in a year-long surge of invitation and welcome to the widest possible cross-section of society. **A beginning might involve building a simple list of those with whom they are connected and considering how their relationship to the blessed Figures of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh can be strengthened in the next year: families, friends and acquaintances who represent concentric circles around the Bahá'í community and who can be drawn ever nearer to Him who is its Centre.** (21 November 2016, Letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada to the Friends gathered at the Feast of Speech)

Examples from Reflections on Growth

Reflections on Growth is a document prepared under the auspices of the International Teaching Centre for the institution of the Counsellors.

In the Malegaon cluster, **India**, two celebrations were held. One of these was in the neighbourhood of Shiwajiwadi where, during the morning, families of the children and junior youth organized devotional gatherings in their homes across six lanes. **The children's class teachers created a space in front of each home to have conversations about the activities of the Bahá'í community.** During the day, the children, junior youth, teachers, animators, and members of the Local Spiritual Assembly visited homes and walked along every lane explaining to the residents of the entire neighbourhood the principles of the Bahá'í Faith and the significance of the Twin Holy Days. By that evening, 450 residents gathered for the celebrations. Six celebrations were held in the Nashik cluster for the 2016 Twin Holy Days. (Reflections on Growth, June 2017)

In **Dubai**, 29 celebrations were held for the Twin Holy Days in 2016. Around 800 people attended, of which 416 were friends of the Faith. The celebrations lasted for an entire week and took place every morning and evening. Both big and small gatherings were held in the neighbourhoods. (Reflections on Growth, June 2017)

During a series of institutional meetings in **Colombia**, consultations centred on how the bicentenary celebrations can be used as special opportunities to reach out to the widest possible cross section of society. The following account illustrates how these gatherings gave an impulse to actions at the local level with the involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies. During the institutional meeting, we reflected on what the Universal House of Justice was asking of us in the 18 May 2016 letter. **We decided to make a list of all those with whom we share a connection, and among them, those with whom we could initiate a conversation about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and whom we could invite to join in the community-building activities. The exercise of making a list gave us a glimpse of how a small group—of, let's say, some 20 to 30 people—has the potential to invite a few thousand to the celebrations.** After these meetings, each Regional Bahá'í Council made plans to visit many Local Assemblies in their respective regions to help more and more friends prepare for the celebrations. We are seeing that Assemblies and other agencies are, through a similar process, helping local believers to actively think about and make concrete plans to invite the largest number of people possible. (Reflections on Growth, June 2017)

Questions from the Community

Is the Local Spiritual Assembly organizing anything for the entire community or prominent persons?

As the guidance indicates the "locus" of activity should be at the local level, and the friends are encouraged to find creative ways to celebrate. Accordingly the current plan for the locality is that all celebrations will occur at the feast, neighbourhood, and team level. In order to accomplish this we will need many more friends, including friends of the faith, involved in the planning process.

The Local Spiritual Assembly is organizing an external affairs campaign to reach out to dignitaries such as Members of Parliament and officials at the City of Vancouver, but the friends are also encouraged to consider that "prominent individual" could refer to the local school principal, a grandmother in the community, the community centre director, or any other individual seen by the local community as a leader, all of whom might already have a relationship with someone in the Faith. Friends are encouraged to invite their contacts of this nature to their Holy Day celebrations, and to think about what types of activities might further increase the process of "connecting hearts with Baha'u'llah".

Would it be appropriate to combine the two Holy Day events?

The Birth of the Bab is from sunset on the 20th of October until sunset on the 21st, and the Birth of Baha'u'llah is from sunset of the 21st until sunset on the 22nd of October. However, it is clear that the Twin Holy Days, just as Their beloved Revelations, are inextricably linked and the celebrations on either day are to celebrate the Twin Manifestations. As mentioned in the guidance above, the friends are encouraged to celebrate the Holy Days throughout the 48 hours.

What are the details for the film from House of Justice?

"A completed version, with subtitled versions in Arabic, English, French, Persian, Russian and Spanish will be made available for National Assemblies to download by mid-September, at which time we will make it available to everyone. We hope this information helps you in your plans to screen the film with your friends and neighbours in both intimate and formal settings." (July 11, 2017 Message from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Canada to the Friends gathered at the Feast of Words)

Should each area be organizing a larger gathering or many smaller events?

Similar to the process described in the National Assembly's 21 November message above, the friends have hopefully taken advantage of the systematic process of working with lists and engaging their circles of friends in conversations to draw them ever closer to the Twin Luminaries. Accordingly, the events planned for the Twin Holy Days should be planned with these friends and conversations in mind.

Are there funds available for venue and other material resources?

In anticipation of the surge of activity around this period of special potency, the Local Spiritual Assembly has set aside approximately \$12,000 in funds to support the holy day activities being planned. The friends are encouraged not to let lack of funds be a barrier to their planning, while also keeping the treasurer apprised of any material needs of the community. At the same time, we should remember the precious resource the life-blood of the Faith represents to the growing community across our cluster, region and country, and not plan

extravagant occasions that might distract from a spiritually potent occasion. Friends should feel comfortable to contact the Assembly's Treasurer, Foad Shodjai, 778-991-9919, treasury@vancouverbahai.org, for any questions or consultation on managing expenses.

Would it be appropriate to sell tickets?

Experience has shown that selling tickets can create certain conditions which might lead to division or exclusion. Fitting the uplifting and reverant atmosphere encouraged by the House of Justice, friends are encouraged to consider invitations rather than tickets. Logistically, this demonstrates the importance of working with lists and knowing how many people might attend a given event amongst the team planning the event. If friends are concerned about the funds being needed, they are encouraged to consult with the treasurer after reviewing the above answers.

What should the program of the events be?

As described above in the guidance, the friends are encouraged to plan a diverse array of creative programs that will connect hearts with Baha'u'llah, and they could range from breakfast devotionals to formal music evenings, from hikes to intimate family dinners, and anything in between. We should remember that the program should be uplifting and reverant, and "in all these spaces the subject of conversation was the appearance of these "two Luminaries that rose successively over the horizon of the world".