

# ***Quebec Bahá'í Summer School***

August 22-25, 2019

## ***Enhancing the Devotional Character of Our Lives***

### **COURSE MATERIALS**

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unit 1: The Devotional Spirit	page 2
Unit 2: The Devotional Spirit in Our Daily Lives	page 4
Unit 3: The Devotional Character of Community Life	page 8
Unit 4: The Institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár	page 12

## **UNIT 1 - THE DEVOTIONAL SPIRIT**

### **A. Love and Submission**

[1] O Son of Being! With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I created thee; and within thee have I placed the essence of My light. Be thou content with it and seek naught else, for My work is perfect and My command is binding. Question it not, nor have a doubt thereof. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part 1 from the Arabic, No. 12]

[2] O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part 1 from the Arabic, No. 4]

[3] O Son of Spirit! There is no peace for thee save by renouncing thyself and turning unto Me; for it behooveth thee to glory in My name, not in thine own; to put thy trust in Me and not in thyself, since I desire to be loved alone and above all that is. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part 1 from the Arabic, No. 8]

[4] O Son of Spirit! Ask not of Me that which We desire not for thee, then be content with what We have ordained for thy sake, for this is that which profiteth thee, if therewith thou dost content thyself. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part 1 from the Arabic, No. 18]

[5] O Son of Being! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part 1 from the Arabic, No. 5]

#### **Themes for discussion:**

- a. *What do these extracts tell us about God's reasons for creating us and what He expects from us in return?*
- b. *Are we forced to comply with God's expectations? What are the consequences if we do not comply?*
- c. *If the purpose of life is not just to acquire things and enjoy ourselves, then why are we here?*

### **B. Prayer and Worship**

[6] The Twin Luminaries of this resplendent age have taught us this: Prayer is the essential spiritual conversation of the soul with its Maker, direct and without intermediation. It is the spiritual food that sustains the life of the spirit. Like the morning's dew, it brings freshness to the heart and cleanses it, purifying it from attachments of the insistent self. It is a fire that burns away the veils and a light that leads to the ocean of reunion with the Almighty. On its wings does the soul soar in the heavens of God and draw closer to the divine reality. Upon its quality depends the development of the limitless capacities of the soul and the attraction of the bounties of God, but the prolongation of prayer is not desirable. The powers latent in prayer are manifested when it is motivated by the love of God, beyond any fear or favour, and free from ostentation and superstition. It is to be expressed with a sincere and pure heart conducive to contemplation and meditation so that the rational faculty can be illumined by its effects. Such prayer will transcend the limitation of words and go well

beyond mere sounds. The sweetness of its melodies must gladden and uplift the heart and reinforce the penetrating power of the Word, transmuting earthly inclinations into heavenly attributes and inspiring selfless service to humankind. [Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraph 6]

[7] There is nothing sweeter in the world of existence than prayer.... The greatest attainment or the sweetest state is none other than conversation with God. It creates spirituality, creates mindfulness and celestial feelings, begets new attractions of the Kingdom and engenders the susceptibilities of the higher intelligence. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, cited in *Star of the West*, vol. VIII, no. 4 (17 May 1917), p. 41]

[8] ... What every believer, new or old, should realize is that the Cause has the spiritual power to re-create us if we make the effort to let that power influence us, and the greatest help in this respect is prayer. We must supplicate Bahá'u'lláh to assist us to overcome the failings in our own characters, and also exert our own will-power in mastering ourselves. [Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 27 January 1945 written on his behalf to an individual believer, Compilation on “Prayer and Devotional Life”, extract 11]

[9] O Lord! Unto Thee I repair for refuge, and toward all Thy signs I set my heart. O Lord! Whether traveling or at home, and in my occupation or in my work, I place my whole trust in Thee. Grant me then Thy sufficing help so as to make me independent of all things, O Thou Who art unsurpassed in Thy mercy! Bestow upon me my portion, O Lord, as Thou pleasest, and cause me to be satisfied with whatsoever Thou hast ordained for me. Thine is the absolute authority to command. [The Báb, *Bahá'í Prayers*, pp. 55-6]

[10] Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. [*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, p. 141]

#### Themes for discussion:

- a. What does the above description of prayer tell us about our spiritual nature?
- b. What is the source of the transformative power of prayer?
- c. Is it possible to for a person to overcome the weaknesses in his or her own character? How should one go about it?

### **C. Creating an Uplifting Environment and Atmosphere**

[11] My meaning is this, that in every aspect of life, purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement, exalt the human condition and further the development of man's inner reality. Even in the physical realm, cleanliness will conduce to spirituality, as the Holy Writings clearly state. And although bodily cleanliness is a physical thing, it hath, nevertheless, a powerful influence on the life of the spirit. [*Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, No. 129, pp. 146-7]

[12] It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well-designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful action, a well written book, pleasing garments – in fact, all things that

have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit .... [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Compilation on “The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith”, extract 24, p. 11]

[13] The simplicity characterizing the offering of Bahá'í prayers, whether obligatory or otherwise, should be maintained. Rigidity and rituals should be strictly avoided. [Shoghi Effendi, hand-written note appended to a letter dated 30 October 1936 written to an individual believer on his behalf, Compilation on “Prayer and Devotional Life”, extract 36]

[14] The Word of God may be likened to the life-giving breezes of the divine springtime. When chanted in spiritual tones, it bestoweth the breath of life and granteth true salvation. It bringeth forth a garden of roses from the pure soil, and wafteth its musk-laden fragrance throughout the world. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet newly translated from the Persian, Compilation on “Prayer and Devotional Life”, extract 5]

[15] We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Most Holy Book*, verse 51]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *What do the above extracts suggest about the attention that should be given to the physical setting and other arrangements for devotional gatherings? Share learning from your own experience in trying to create an uplifting environment.*
- b. *Discuss how certain kinds of practices might develop into rituals and what problems this might cause.*
- c. *What is the proper role of music and singing or chanting in devotions? What kind of music might become “as wings to self and passion”?*

## **UNIT 2 - THE DEVOTIONAL SPIRIT IN OUR DAILY LIVES**

### **A. Worship, Service and Daily Living**

[1] Know thou that nothing will benefit thee in this life save supplication and invocation unto God, service in His vineyard, and with a heart full of love, be in constant servitude unto Him. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 375]

[2] Faith is the magnet which draws the confirmation of the Merciful One. Service is the magnet which attracts heavenly strength. [*Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. I, p. 62]

[3] Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute! [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, no. 26]

[4] The friends ... should turn to God for guidance in prayer and meditation, should study the Teachings of the Faith and then arise and act. Prayer and meditation, and study, without action, are of no value, and action must be reinforced by these other things, which strengthen the soul and nourish the mind. [Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 30 May 1956 written on his behalf to the Hands of the Cause in Asia, Compilation on "Prayer and Devotional Life", extract 53]

[5] Divorced from ... social, humanitarian, educational and scientific pursuits ..., Bahá'í worship, however exalted in its conception, however passionate in fervor, can never hope to achieve beyond the meagre and often transitory results produced by the contemplations of the ascetic or the communion of the passive worshiper. It cannot afford lasting satisfaction and benefit to the worshiper himself, much less to humanity in general, unless and until translated and transfused into ...dynamic and disinterested service to the cause of humanity .... [Shoghi Effendi, letter to the Baha'is of the United States and Canada, 25 October 1929, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 186]

[6] Ultimately, prayers must be lived in purposeful lives. [Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'is of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraph 7]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *What does the "magnet" of service attract and why? Can you share examples from your experience?*
- b. *In what sense are the results of worship alone likely to be "meagre and often transitory"?*
- c. *What does it mean to live one's prayers in a purposeful life?*

**B. Our Relations with Others**

[7] O Children of Men! 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. Such is My counsel to you... [Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Part I from the Arabic, No. 68]

[8] Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore, do not look at the shortcomings of anybody; see with the sight of forgiveness. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 92]

Themes for discussion:

- a) *How can we avoid becoming angry or impatient with one another?*
- b) *What does it mean to "see with the sight of forgiveness", and why is it so important?*

### **C. The Way We Express Ourselves**

[9] A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding.... [*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXII, p. 289]

[10] For the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century.... That seeker should also regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quenqueth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul." [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Book of Certitude*, p. 193]

[11] The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world. Therefore an enlightened man of wisdom should primarily speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility. And likewise He saith: One word is like unto springtime causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison. It behoveth a prudent man of wisdom to speak with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station. [*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 173]

[12] In accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know.' Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine where and in what form the truth can be found.' The teacher should not consider himself as learned and others ignorant. Such a thought breedeth pride, and pride is not conducive to influence. The teacher should not see in himself any superiority; he should speak with the utmost kindness, lowliness and humility, for such speech exerteth influence and educateth the souls. [*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, No. 15, p. 30]

#### **Themes for discussion:**

- a. *How is it that a tongue can be both a "lodestone" and a "smouldering fire"?*
- b. *Why are the consequences of backbiting and other negative talk so damaging?*
- c. *What kind of self-expression is the most effective in exerting a positive influence on those to whom we are speaking?*

### **D. The Home Environment**

[13] O ye loving mothers, know ye that in God's sight, the best of all ways to worship Him is to educate the children and train them in all the perfections of humankind; and no nobler deed than this can be imagined. [*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, No. 114, p. 139]

[14] Ye should consider the question of goodly character as of the first importance. It is incumbent upon every father and mother to counsel their children over a long period, and guide them unto those things which lead to everlasting honor. [*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, No. 108, p. 134]

[15] For parents exercise indispensable influence through the home environment they consciously create by their love of God, their striving to adhere to His laws, their spirit of service to His Cause, their lack of fanaticism, and their freedom from the corrosive effects of backbiting. [Universal House of Justice, 2000 Ridván Message, paragraph 28]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *Why is the education of children considered “the best of all ways” for a mother to worship God?*
- b. *How should fathers and mothers counsel their children? Why does it need to be done “over a long period”?*
- c. *Discuss the five qualities by which the Universal House of Justice suggests that parents can consciously create a spiritual home environment and thus “exercise indispensable influence” on their children.*

**E. In Our Work and Studies**

[16] In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are [counted as] worship. The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer. A physician ministering to the sick, gently, tenderly, free from prejudice and believing in the solidarity of the human race, is giving praise.” [‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 189]

[17] ... in accordance with the divine teachings the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship. If a man engageth with all his power in the acquisition of a science or in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God in churches and temples. Thus as thou enterest a school of agriculture and strivest in the acquisition of that science thou art day and night engaged in acts of worship—acts that are accepted at the threshold of the Almighty. What bounty greater than this that science should be considered as an act of worship and art as service to the Kingdom of God. [*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, No. 126, pp. 144-5]

[18] The eyes of the people of the world are beginning to be focussed on us; and, as humanity's plight goes from bad to worse, we will be watched ever more intently by non-Bahá'ís, to see whether we do uphold our own institutions whole-heartedly; whether we are the people of the new creation or not; whether we live up to our beliefs, principles and laws in deed as well as word. We cannot be too careful. We cannot be too exemplary. [Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 5 August 1955 written on his behalf to the Secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 350]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *Under what conditions are work and studies counted as worship?*
- b. *How can our conduct make a difference in the place where we study or work?*

**F. Fighting Our Spiritual Battles**

[19] O Son of Man! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it. [Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Part I from the Arabic, #51]

[20] The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering. The more the ground is ploughed the better the seed will grow, the better the harvest will be. Just as the plough furrows the earth deeply, purifying it of weeds and thistles, so suffering and tribulation free man from the petty affairs of this worldly life until he arrives at a state of complete detachment. His attitude in this world will be that of divine happiness. Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 191]

[21] We must not only be patient with others, infinitely patient!, but also with our own poor selves, remembering that even the Prophets of God sometimes got tired and cried out in despair! .... He urges you to persevere and add up your accomplishments, rather than to dwell on the dark side of things. Everyone's life has both a dark and bright side. The Master said: turn your back to the darkness and your face to Me. [Shoghi Effendi, letter written on his behalf to an individual believer, 22 October 1949, *Unfolding Destiny*, pp. 456-7]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *Why are tests important for us? What is their role in our lives?*
- b. *What should be our attitude towards the challenges and difficulties we may face?*
- c. *What gives us the courage to persevere when tests seem overwhelming or beyond our capacity?*

**UNIT 3 - THE DEVOTIONAL CHARACTER OF COMMUNITY LIFE****A. A New Pattern for Society**

[1] The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man that has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion



will degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing. [Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 8 December 1935 written on his behalf to an individual believer, Compilation on “Prayer and Devotional Life”, extract 71]

[2] Gather ye together with the utmost joy and fellowship and recite the verses revealed by the merciful Lord. By so doing the doors to true knowledge will be opened to your inner beings, and ye will then feel your souls endowed with steadfastness and your hearts filled with radiant joy. [Bahá'u'lláh, from a Tablet recently translated from the Arabic, Compilation on “Prayer and Devotional Life”, extract 68]

[3] We have called upon the Bahá'ís to see in their endeavours of community building the creation of a new pattern of how society can be. Taken in its entirety, that pattern fosters capacity for service—for the education of young generations, for the empowerment of the youth, for the spiritual education of children, for the enhancement of the capacity to draw upon the influence of the Word of God in accompanying others into the field of service, and for the social and economic advancement of a people in the light of the divine teachings for the age. Essential to that pattern is the devotional meeting—a communal aspect of the godly life and a dimension of the concept of the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár*—which represents a marvelous opportunity for your community not only to worship the Almighty and seek His benedictions in your own lives, but to extend to your fellow citizens the spiritual energies of prayer, to restore for them the purity of worship, to kindle in their hearts faith in the confirmations of God, and to strengthen in them, no less than in yourselves, eagerness to serve the nation and humanity and to show constructive resilience in the path of justice. [Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraph 8]

[4] Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. [Universal House of Justice, 2013 Ridván Message, paragraph 6]

[5] The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. [Universal House of Justice, message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 29 December 2015, paragraph 49]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *If the chief goal of the Bahá'í Faith is the development of the individual and society, why is it that the soul of man must first be fed?*
- b. *What are some of the characteristics of the new pattern of social life that Bahá'ís and their friends are trying to create?*
- c. *What changes might occur in a community where a devotional attitude is spreading through the population?*
- d. *What benefits do devotional meetings offer to people from the wider society?*

**B. The Way Decisions are Made**

[6] Consultation has been ordained by Bahá'u'lláh as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined. It is applicable to the marriage partners and within the family, and indeed, in all areas where believers participate in mutual decision-making. It requires all participants to express their opinions with absolute freedom and without apprehension that they will be censured or their views belittled.... [Universal House of Justice, letter to an individual believer, 24 January 1993]

[7] The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Compilation on “Bahá'í Consultation”, p. 3]

[8] The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly .... The second condition: they must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. [‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Compilation on “Bahá'í Consultation”, p. 3]

[9] Consultation is no easy skill to learn, requiring as it does the subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision. In this field Bahá'í youth may demonstrate the efficiency, the vigor, the access of unity which arise from true consultation and, by contrast, demonstrate the futility of partisanship, lobbying, debate, secret diplomacy, and unilateral action which characterize modern affairs. [Universal House of Justice, message to the Bahá'í Youth, 10 June 1966]

Themes for discussion:

- a) *How is the decision-making process described in these passages different from the way decisions are usually made in today's society?*
- b) *Why is it difficult to learn to consult? What skills and spiritual qualities must we acquire to participate effectively?*

**C. Individuals, Institutions and the Community**

[10] So it is that the individual, with no regard for “personal benefits and selfish advantages,”

comes to see him- or herself as “one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing,” whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the friends come to recognize that “wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort” are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that “the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” and that “the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.” And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá’u’lláh’s new World Order.

And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian’s words that “their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent.” “Never” would they be “led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.” “With extreme humility,” they approach their tasks and “endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.” Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious.

Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.” [Universal House of Justice, message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 December 2010, paragraphs 41-43]

Themes for discussion:

- a) *Try to summarize, in a few words, what these three paragraphs say about the individual, the institutions and the community.*
- b) *What spiritual qualities should characterize the attitude of those chosen to serve on institutions towards their responsibilities?*
- c) *What changes are needed to make it possible for the relations between a community and its governing institutions to be based on humble fellowship and the spirit of frank and loving consultation?*
- d) *Reflect together on what it will be like to live in the kind of community described in this passage.*

## **UNIT 4 - THE INSTITUTION OF THE MASHRIQU'L-ADHKAR**

### **A. Worship and Service Combined**

[1] The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as “one of the most vital institutions of the world”, weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. [Universal House of Justice, 2012 Ridván Message, paragraph 9]

[2] As the place from which spiritual forces are to radiate, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the focal point for dependencies to be raised up for the well-being of humanity and is the expression of a common will and eagerness to serve. These dependencies—centres of education and scientific learning as well as cultural and humanitarian endeavor—embody the ideals of social and spiritual progress to be achieved through the application of knowledge, and demonstrate how, when religion and science are in harmony, they elevate the station of the human being and lead to the flourishing of civilization. As your lives amply demonstrate, worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation. This concept of worship—inseparable from service—is promulgated by the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. [Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraph 5]

#### *Themes for discussion:*

- a) *Share your understanding of why the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is “one of the most vital institutions of the world”.*
- b) *What is the nature of the dependencies to be built around the Houses of Worship? Can you give some examples?*
- c) *How will these dependencies demonstrate the harmonious blending of science and religion?*

### **B. A Unique Concept**

[3] Those invited to break the ground with Him ['Abdu'l-Bahá] on that spring day came from diverse backgrounds—Norwegian, Indian, French, Japanese, Persian, indigenous American, to name but a few. It was as if the House of Worship, yet unbuilt, was fulfilling the wishes of the Master, expressed on the eve of the ceremony, for every such edifice: “that humanity might find a place of meeting” and “that the proclamation of the oneness of mankind shall go forth from its open courts of holiness”. [Universal House of Justice, 2012 Ridván Message, paragraph 1]

[4] The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is a unique concept in the annals of religion and symbolizes the teachings of the new Day of God. A collective centre of society to promote cordial affection, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár stands as a universal place of worship open to all the inhabitants of a locality irrespective of their religious affiliation, background, ethnicity, or gender and a haven for the deepest contemplation on spiritual reality and foundational questions of life, including individual and collective responsibility for the betterment of society. Men and women, children and youth, are held in its embrace as equals. This singular and integral universality is captured in the very structure of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, whose design as a nine-sided edifice conveys a sense of completeness and perfection symbolized by that number. [Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraph 4]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *Why is a Bahá'í House of Worship an ideal “place of meeting” for humanity to come together and proclaim the oneness of mankind?*
- b. *What is unique about the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár?*
- c. *How does the design of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár convey a sense of universality, completeness and perfection?*

**C. Where There Is No House of Worship**

[5] The Bahá'ís of Iran are of course fully conversant with the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár. From the earliest days following the revelation of this law, the friends in the Cradle of the Faith became aware of its significance and committed to its realization within the limited means that their circumstances allowed them. In time, not only did they become the principal force for the construction of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár in 'Ishqábád, but within Iran too the practice of regular dawn prayers took root and inspired service to humankind, with the vision that the seed they were planting would in time flower into tangible reality, yielding its fruit not only in the construction of these centres of worship, but in the creation of dependencies for humanitarian service which that worship would inspire.

And so it was that, under the guiding hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a pattern of communal worship—the unity it engenders and the desire to be of service that it inspires—became an integral part of many a local Bahá'í community in Iran. In this regard, the Master's vision provided for a variety of settings and circumstances in which the concept of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár could, in its embryonic form, be expressed. Consider His words in this regard:

As to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, it is of the utmost importance.... It may assume any form, for even if it be an underground pit, that pit shall become a sheltering paradise, an exalted bower, and a garden of delight. It shall become a centre wherein the spirits are gladdened and the hearts attracted to the Abhá Kingdom. [...]

Beloved friends: Gatherings dedicated to prayer throughout your blessed land, in every neighbourhood, town, village, and hamlet, and the increasing access that your compatriots are gaining to Bahá'í prayers are enabling your community to shine the light of unity in the assemblage of humanity, lending a share to the endeavours of your fellow believers throughout the world. Plant, then, the seeds of future Māshriqu'l-Ādhkárs for the benefit of all, and ignite countless beacons of light against the gloom of hatred and inequity.

[Universal House of Justice, letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran, 18 December 2014, paragraphs 1 and 2]

[6] The union of these two [worship and service] is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the Plan, particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. The correlation of worship and service is especially pronounced in those clusters around the world where Bahá'í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in social action is apparent. [Universal House of Justice, 2012 Ridván Message, paragraph 9]

Themes for discussion:

- a. *Even if the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, in its embryonic state, is no more than a hole in the ground, what kind of a place does 'Abdu'l-Bahá promise it will become?*
- b. *How are two "essential, inseparable aspects of Baha'i life" (worship and service) reflected in our community-building activities?*
- c. *How do the devotional meetings we are holding today prepare the way for the time when every community will have its own Mashriqu'l-Adhkár?*

**D. What Progress is Being Made in Building Houses of Worship?**

[7] With exceeding joy we now announce that national Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up in two countries; the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea. In these, the criteria we set are demonstrably met, and the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable. With the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago under way, the initiation of projects for building national Houses of Worship offers yet another gratifying evidence of the penetration of the Faith of God into the soil of society. [.....]

Our hearts brimming with thankfulness to the Ancient Beauty, we rejoice to inform you that we are entering into consultations with respective National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the erection of the first local Houses of Worship in each of the following clusters: Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Columbia; and Tanna, Vanuatu. [.....]

Beloved co-workers: The ground broken by the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá a hundred years ago is to be broken again in seven more countries, this being but the prelude to the day when within every city and village, in obedience to the bidding of Baha'u'llah, a building is upraised for the worship of the Lord. From these Dawning-Points of the Remembrance of God will shine the rays of His light and peal out the anthems of His praise. [Universal House of Justice, 2012 Ridván Message, paragraphs 8, 9 and 11]

[8] In Santiago, Chile, and Battambang, Cambodia, the world's most recently dedicated Houses of Worship are becoming established centres of attraction, beacons to their societies of all that the Faith stands for. And their number is about to grow. We are delighted to announce that the dedication ceremony for the Temple in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, is to take place in July. Further, the construction of more Houses of Worship lies just over the horizon. In Vanuatu, permission is being obtained to start building. In India and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a highly complex and exacting process has at last led to the successful acquisition of land. The joy at seeing the design of the first national Mashriqu'l-Adhkár unveiled in Papua New Guinea at Naw-Rúz had hardly subsided when the design of the local House of Worship in Kenya was also revealed. Meanwhile, we have every expectation that the recently released statement and compilation about the institution of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, prepared by our Research Department, will further stimulate the friends' appreciation of the significance of worship in community life. For in their acts of service, especially in their regular devotional gatherings, Bahá'ís everywhere are laying the spiritual foundations of future Houses of Worship. [Universal House of Justice, 2018 Ridván Message, paragraph 8]

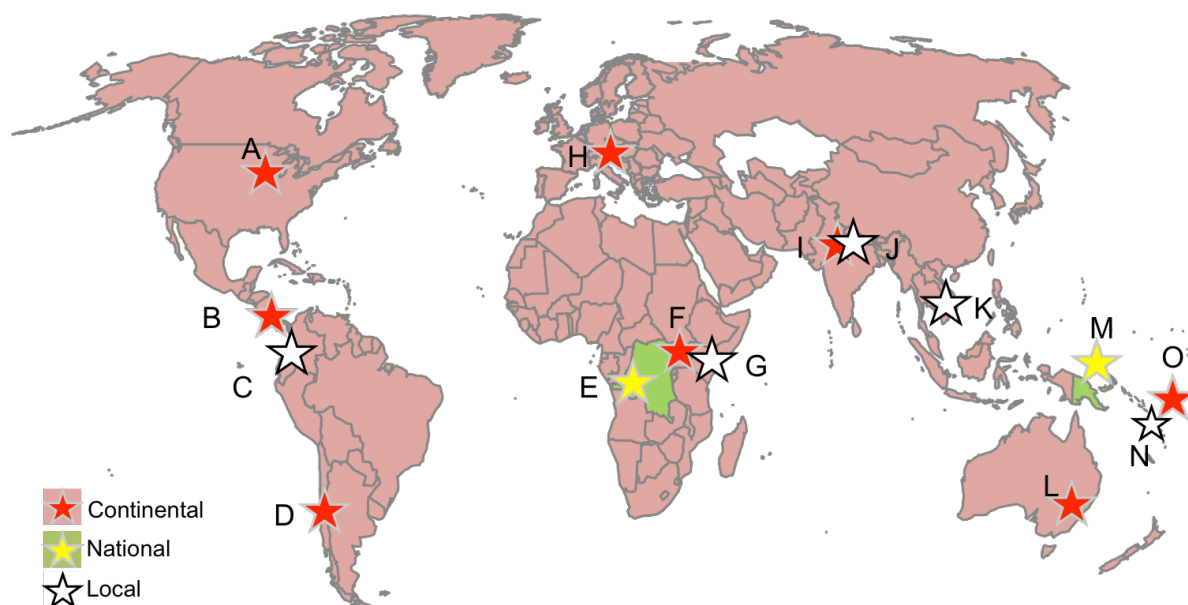
Themes for discussion:

- a. *Could members of your group who have visited a Bahá'í House of Worship somewhere in the world share their experiences and impressions?*
- b. *For what project was the ground broken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912?*
- c. *Use the "World Map Exercise" on the next page to visualize the location of the existing Houses of Worship and those that are planned or under construction. Which continent will have three such edifices, and which country will have two? What is the significance of this notable fact?*

### World Map Exercise

Kindly refer to the map below. You will see stars and letters marking the location of each of the eight continental Houses of Worship existing today, as well as the two national and five local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs* to be built in accordance with the call of the Universal House of Justice. Please try to identify each of these present or future Dawning-Points of the Remembrance of God.

#### PRESENT AND PLANNED BAHÁ'Í HOUSES OF WORSHIP



A	
B	
C	
D	
E	
F	
G	
H	
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J	
K	
L	
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