

A surge of pioneers accelerating the movement of clusters

The jubilant occasion of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh brought great vigour to the pattern of action of the worldwide Bahá'í community and contributed to the rise in its capacity “to bring friends and acquaintances into contact with its community life; to inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour; to articulate how spiritual truths can be translated into sustained practical action; and, above all, to converse not only about the teachings that will build the world anew, but about the One Who taught them: Bahá'u'lláh”. The Universal House of Justice has described the eight cycles between the two bicentenaries of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb as the period that would require the greatest share of the effort needed to achieve the objectives of the Five Year Plan, drawing on the spirit and enthusiasm generated by the first of these celebrations. Pioneering is one of the key strategies for channelling the energies released in this period; it reinforces and complements other efforts and is helping to strengthen programmes of growth in thousands of clusters.

A heroic response has already been elicited from the body of believers, particularly among youth and families, to arise to fulfil goals for homefront and international pioneering. Institutions are playing a vital role in identifying pioneers and assisting with their orientation and deployment to a locality with the purpose of raising capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social, and intellectual development. The community's heightened awareness of the purpose of pioneering and its importance has led to a burgeoning of support for pioneers in a variety of forms, from tutors and teachers in neighbouring clusters working alongside them to friends contributing to their deputization and providing in-kind assistance, such as food and lodging.

We hope the stories in this edition of *Reflections on Growth* will inspire the efforts of the friends during the two cycles leading up to the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb and those that follow.

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In the following two accounts, pioneers made efforts to understand the existing patterns of life within the local population and to engage friends in conversations that elicit participation. The first account illustrates how every member of a pioneer family fostered genuine friendships and collaborated with their neighbours to open spaces for community-building activities. The second depicts the efforts of a team of pioneers who took diligent steps to engage many families in unified action towards the spiritual education of the members of their community.

UNITED STATES

Rockwall, Texas, is a small, suburban town with a population of approximately 40,000. It consists of individual family homes with several outdoor areas where children and families gather. It was here that an assistant to the Auxiliary Board member decided to pioneer with her family a few years ago. Since then, a group of friends gradually began working together to serve their community. In the account below, the pioneer explains how she and her family started to make connections with those around them, which in time created opportunities for community-building activities to begin.

When our family moved to Rockwall as homefront pioneers, we were excited for the opportunity to share the Message of Bahá'u'lláh with a new community of friends. Our experience as pioneers has helped us grow as a family and learn many new things about teaching the Bahá'í Faith.

In the first few months, we took the time to meet our neighbours and build friendships, especially with the parents of the children our kids played with on our street. When we wanted to start our first core activity—a children's class—we decided to visit these new friends in their homes one by one and personally invite them to attend the class. We had some wonderful conversations with these families, and many of them expressed interest, but not many children showed up for the class. We also tried to reach out to our neighbours indirectly with the idea of studying Holy Scriptures from various religions and looking for solutions to the challenging problems of our society. After some initial conversations, however, we came to realize that it would have been better to be more direct from the beginning about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and in teaching the Faith. These first experiences, though disappointing, gave us an opportunity to reflect on how our teaching methods were being received in this community and to think about the strategies we might try next.

One of the most significant things we observed was that true friendship was the foundation for community building. Every member of our family consciously pursued activities that would open doors to meeting others and building friendships with them. From coaching sports teams and meeting friends at the bus stop to approaching neighbours at the park and at school functions, we made every effort to widen our circle of friends.

As time went on, we learned more and more through trial and error how to elevate our conversations with our new friends. We found that being open about the love we have for Bahá'u'lláh and His healing vision for our society helped raise conversations to a spiritual level. As we conversed with these friends, we tried to pay attention to what they seemed to be searching for in their lives. In response, we would offer to pray together, invite them to a fireside or study circle, or simply try to enrich the content of our discussions by sharing Bahá'u'lláh's principles when the opportunity naturally presented itself.

As the family continued to deepen and consolidate these friendships, a foundation was built upon which a blossoming community life could take shape.

We are blessed to have two children, who were seven and ten years old when we moved here. This opened several avenues that enabled us to engage with others and allowed certain activities to be born naturally, including children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional gatherings, and study circles. It was particularly exciting when our children began to invite their friends to activities on their own initiative.

The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme has been the engine of our cluster's growth. We were able to connect with a wider circle of people once our son decided to invite his peers to form a junior youth group. He did all the initial outreach on his own, having conversations with friends, explaining the spiritual

purpose of the programme, describing the activities they would do—such as the study of books, arts, crafts, and games—and inviting them to participate. About ten junior youth initially joined, and soon they brought others to the group.

We followed these invitations with visits to the parents of the junior youth. We would discuss the purpose of the group, the transformative nature of the programme, and the specific activities we planned to do, and would share that the programme is based on the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. We worked hard to get to know all the families involved through home visits and other activities that strengthened our friendships. Over time, many of these families have become strong supporters of the programme and have invited others to participate.

The junior youth group grew, eventually coming to have approximately 20 members. Soon, their families were taking their first steps on a path of service, serving alongside us to support the group as well as a children's class that had started. Some of the parents asked about opening a group for the participants' younger siblings who also wanted to participate. Because of this, several more activities started, and we now have four junior youth groups in our cluster, with almost 50 participants.

There were some efforts to reach out to local youth, involve them in the conversation about community building that was emerging in the neighbourhood, and invite them to become animators. We realized, however, that the most effective approach at this stage in the development of our neighbourhood was to accompany the young people who were already participating in the junior youth programme as they reached the age of youth and entered the main sequence of courses. We invited some of the older junior youth in our groups to think about how they could serve their community. This group of friends was familiar with the purpose of the junior youth programme and the institute process, believed in the transformative power of these activities, and had become close-knit through their participation in the programme. To begin, we studied with them portions of the materials from the youth conferences in 2013, which opened the way for further exploration of important themes such as the twofold moral purpose, the constructive and destructive forces of society, the period of youth, and the nature of a path of service. Exploring these themes helped the youth prepare themselves to enter the field of service with a new perspective, deeper understanding, and a strong sense of purpose.

Another way we were able to expand community-building activities was by engaging whole families. Once a family member was participating in a core activity, we would reach out to the other members and talk with them about the nature of the activities, their impact on the community, and the opportunity for the entire family to become involved. As the junior youth programme gained in numbers and strength, we started weekly family devotional gatherings and firesides. These gatherings provided a regular occasion for deeper conversations about the community-building endeavours.

This was the start of a process that involved a growing number of people in the neighbourhood in thinking and learning about contributing to the betterment of their community.

NORWAY

Inspired by a deep sense of purpose and enthusiasm, two families decided to move to a neighbourhood called **Fjell**, in the municipality of Drammen, situated in the **Buskerud** cluster. Through consultation with the institutions and reflection on the relevant guidance, these friends came to understand that at the heart of their efforts was close collaboration with an expanding group of local inhabitants dedicated to the process of community building. Within a year, a spirit of collective endeavour had emerged, with over 200 local inhabitants—including entire families—actively participating in and supporting a growing number of core activities.

We began our efforts by carefully reading the reality of the neighbourhood through interaction with the local residents, aiming to learn about the existing pattern of life. With this in mind, we held a weekend campaign to engage in conversations with our new neighbours, form friendships with them, explore their aspirations for the neighbourhood, and introduce them to the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and the community-building efforts. We found that this small locality of some 7,000 inhabitants, with a rich diversity of people speaking many languages, was strongly family-oriented and that junior youth, children, and their mothers were eager to have conversations about the material and spiritual progress and well-being of the neighbourhood. During the same weekend, we were able to form a junior youth group with 12 participants. The following weekend, we invited a group of mothers who were interested in the spiritual education of their children to learn about children's classes.

When we began to study the sequence of institute courses with the mothers, we found that we needed to reconsider our approach to having conversations, studying the courses, and starting core activities. In the past, our approach had been more formal; we would make appointments with potential participants days in advance and study in a designated place. As we grew to understand where people naturally met during the day, we were able to incorporate the study circles into the pattern of their daily lives, meeting in locations convenient for them. Some of these mothers found it natural to assist with the children's classes at the same time as they advanced in their study of the institute courses.

Over the next few months, our team wholeheartedly devoted its time to the neighbourhood, seizing every opportunity and meeting almost every day to plan, act, and reflect together. In our continuing conversations with the parents and a growing group of local junior youth—with whom we interacted many times a week—we realized how important it was to create a common sense of purpose as collaborators. We quickly saw how the local friends' high resolve, enthusiasm, and dedication to bringing Bahá'u'lláh's vision of unity to their community became the driving force behind every action taken to invite many families and households in the locality to join in our efforts.

To promote the vision of establishing unity in the neighbourhood, and given that it is made up of many families from various ethnic backgrounds, we had the idea of creating a space where those who were already engaged in the community-building process could invite their neighbours, friends, and relatives. We came to call this event the "family festival".

Before each festival, we hold collective campaigns to invite new people to join. In the last four cycles, we have reached about 1,000 residents through home visits to some 650 households in four apartment blocks. We take note of each new receptive soul we meet, and every cycle make multiple visits to a growing number of local families and individuals in order to deepen bonds of friendship and foster a common understanding about the educational activities being offered to an ever-larger group of people in their neighbourhood.

The programme of the festival includes a devotional portion; short presentations about various spiritual concepts shared by children, junior youth, and youth; consultations with the adults and youth drawing on selected Writings regarding the well-being and betterment of the neighbourhood; and discussions about identifying and assisting others who wish to serve their community. On several occasions, the first few sections of Book 1 of the institute courses were studied with some 40 to 60 individuals, divided into several language groups; this helped us learn about studying the institute materials with large groups.

The family festivals have become an essential feature of life in the neighbourhood. The first took place during the period of the bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, and since then we have held nine more. These festivals occur at least once every cycle, with up to 130 people participating each time. We hold them in the local community centre and try to keep the logistics simple so that we can organize them frequently and easily. The festivals create an atmosphere filled with fellowship, joy, love, devotion, and unity.

In attempting to describe how the community-building process has unfolded over the last few cycles since we settled in this neighbourhood, we feel that it has been a spiritual enterprise imbued with the prayers of many friends. We have learned that we need to trust in God at every step, believing that every individual is longing to serve others and that it is human nature to give ceaselessly of one's possessions, energy, time, and knowledge.

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The following story demonstrates how a summer institute campaign provided a unique opportunity for a group of youth to dedicate their school holidays to intensive training and service. These young people were deeply inspired to more effectively channel their energies towards the advancement of their own clusters as well as others nearby. Some among them decided to serve as homefront pioneers.

AUSTRIA

In the months of July and August 2018, a vibrant group of 20 youth came together in the small town of **Jenbach** in the **Tyrol** cluster for an intensive summer institute campaign. For three weeks, they combined intense study of the sequence of courses with efforts to advance the community-building activities in a nearby neighbourhood. Some then took part in a nine-day national family institute camp as animators and children's class teachers. The young people who participated returned home with experience and heightened enthusiasm. These experiences inspired a small group of youth to arise as homefront pioneers.

The programme of the summer institute campaign began with study of guidance from the Universal House of Justice and relevant materials about the institute process. In this way the youth gained a deeper understanding of the framework for action of the Five Year Plan and built a common vision for continuing to serve upon their return home. Each morning would start with a devotional gathering, followed by stories of heroes and heroines from the early history of the Faith, prepared by the participants.

The youth visited the nearby neighbourhood almost daily, assisting with children's classes and junior youth activities and participating in teaching campaigns. Here, they met new people with whom they had conversations about the community-building process and conducted home visits to deepen the understanding of recently met friends. This shaped their practical understanding of how to engage with others and invite them to join them in walking a path of service. One of the participants commented:

I was a bit frightened at first, but then you prepare in a group and you feel the unity. And then, once you go out, all the fear disappears. You simply feel these confirmations when you have absolute trust in God, and with this trust, you need not be frightened of reaching out to people.

The spirit that the youth felt during the days of learning and teaching in this summer campaign inspired a small group of them to offer a longer period of service as pioneers. A member of one of the institutions describes how this unfolded:

As the weeks went by, one of the young women participating in the summer campaign, inspired by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh, started to feel a desire to contribute to the advancement of a goal cluster. She consulted with the institutions and clearly conveyed that since groups of friends were already serving intensively in her hometown, her heart truly yearned to settle in a new place where she could help establish the junior youth programme and engage an expanding nucleus of people in learning together how to advance a process of community building. So she resigned from her job and asked to accompany us on our next trip to Graz, a city on the other side of the country, where she hoped to serve as a pioneer.

This young woman shared her vision with two other youth in conversations about their personal plans. One of them had also started thinking about homefront pioneering and decided to join her as a pioneer in Graz. The other friend was from Graz herself and was eager to deepen her knowledge of the Faith; she became very enthusiastic about serving and learning alongside them upon her return home.

Immediately following the intensive summer activities, a few members of the institutions went with the youth to Graz in order to identify the neighbourhood where they would soon settle. Now, after six months, a group of five young people is studying, planning, acting, and reflecting together. They are joined and supported in their efforts by an increasing number of friends from the local community and are closely accompanied by the Auxiliary Board member. These youth have continued to intensively advance through the sequence of courses in order to build their capacity as animators and tutors. They have formed a junior youth group and a children's class, and they hold a regular devotional meeting

and a fireside with a growing group of local youth, with whom they plan to begin studying the sequence of courses.

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The following two stories demonstrate how institutions at the national, regional, and local levels facilitated the preparation, deployment, and continued support of pioneers.

COLOMBIA

Over the years, the national and regional institutions and agencies in Colombia have been progressively learning about strategies to support goal clusters in advancing towards the second milestone and beyond, particularly through the recruitment and deployment of homefront pioneers. A key approach has been establishing teams in the clusters that need support, with the intention of raising capacity in the population and fostering a widening nucleus of local friends who are committed to the progress and well-being of their communities. To illustrate this, some members of the National Spiritual Assembly of Colombia shared the following insights:

Although the National Assembly used to make general calls for pioneers, we found that a more effective approach was for regional institutions to identify individuals who possess certain capabilities, invite them to serve as pioneers, and accompany them closely throughout their orientation and deployment.

Identifying pioneers

Members of the regional training institutes and Regional Bahá'í Councils collaborate with Auxiliary Board members to identify these potential pioneers. They consult about the clusters that require support, evaluate their particular needs, and think of pioneers that could best meet those needs, keeping in mind a certain set of capabilities and attitudes. They look for people who have had extensive experience with the institute in the communities where they live, particularly in raising capacity and accompanying others as well as in starting new activities. This foundation of experience and understanding of the institute process can then continue to be put into practice in the clusters where these pioneers will serve.

Orientation and reflection spaces for pioneers

Once pioneers are identified, they are invited to attend an orientation programme. At first, the programme was held at the national level in the western region of the country, but recently a second location was established on the north coast to accommodate the growing number of pioneers being raised in that region. These gatherings have a practical as well as a conceptual component, with a focus on strengthening the abilities to converse with youth and connect them to the educational programmes, to tutor a study circle or animate a junior youth group, and to carry out institute or teaching campaigns.

Over the course of their service, participation in various gatherings has allowed the pioneers to strengthen their capacities and develop their vision for the communities they serve.

When the pioneers are deployed—typically for two or three years—the institutions provide opportunities for them to reflect on their experiences. Every week or two,

a member of the Regional Council or an Auxiliary Board member serving in the region meets with the pioneer to review the progress of the cluster, study guidance together, and reflect on the reality of the community in order to make any necessary adjustments to plans. Then, every four or five months, pioneers are brought together to reflect on their learning experiences and further their training, reinforcing their familiarity with the institute materials, helping them to continually develop their habits and attitudes as they accompany others, and renewing their commitment to advancing these communities. In addition, the pioneers are invited to general reflection spaces, such as coordinator gatherings for the training institute or institutional gatherings, to participate in consultations on the progress of communities at a broader level.

Support from the youth-year-of-service programme

With the spirit and energy generated after the youth conferences in 2013, the youth-year-of-service programme was revitalized to channel a surge of young people who expressed a desire to offer a period of service. A new strategy was then developed: one or two youth are paired with a homefront pioneer to form a team that collaborates with others in actively serving and thinking about how to advance a goal cluster.

The youth in the programme first go through an intensive orientation at an institute facility, lasting four to six weeks, where they review institute courses in preparation to serve as tutors and raise capacity in others. They are then deployed to support a pioneer in a cluster, typically for one year. The cohort of youth comes back to the facility every three months to reflect, share insights, and have additional training. The programme has a dedicated coordinator who oversees the training and conducts regular visits to all the youth throughout the year.

The long-term presence of the pioneer provides a foundation and continuity in following the community-building activities, while the youth facilitate the children's classes and junior youth groups and identify other young people who can become involved. For the youth, it is very useful to have an older person accompany them, helping to guide their activities, following up on their individual daily study of the Writings, and ensuring the stability of their living situation.

Nurturing an outward orientation

One aspect that is emphasized—from the training, to the implementation, to the follow-up by institutions—is that in all their endeavours, pioneers and youth alike should constantly be looking to bring along others to learn about the community-building process, with a view to raising their capacity to take ownership of the activities in the future. This creates more consistency over time and makes the activities more sustainable, even as different youth spend periods of time serving in the community.

This approach has contributed to increasing and maintaining activities in the goal clusters, while raising capacity in youth to contribute to their home clusters upon their return.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Over many cycles, the believers serving on institutions across the Democratic Republic of the Congo made diligent efforts to put in place a systematic process for the uninterrupted deployment of pioneers. As their experience grew, they gained insight into facilitating a continuous flow of pioneers, making the necessary preparations for them to settle and quickly engage in action, and ensuring that there was a system for supporting them at every step. The role of the Regional Councils has been pivotal to these efforts, as has close collaboration with the Local Spiritual Assemblies, the Auxiliary Board members, and their assistants. Below are some reflections shared by members of the National Spiritual Assembly describing how the institutions have learned to systematize the movement of pioneers:

As we began implementing this key strategy over the last few years, we realized that we needed to adjust how we prepared for deployment and supported the efforts of pioneers, as well as how we configured teams of pioneers and visiting friends. Today, the institutions in each region are able to follow common lines of action that have proved effective.

Identifying pioneers

We recognized that the process of identifying potential pioneers should start early on, before the need arises. This meant having ongoing conversations with young believers about dedicating a period of full-time service during the stage of their lives between secondary school and university studies. We also realized that speaking with the parents of the youth about periods of short- and long-term service is essential as they advance along the sequence of courses. We have come to understand that arising to offer a period of service is a natural element of capacity building within the institute process.

The institutions have established a pattern where the Regional Councils, in consultation with Local Spiritual Assemblies, identify potential pioneers who are ready to serve full-time, taking into account specific strengths and experience and their contributions in their home communities. At the same time, they consult with pioneers returning from their posts regarding their availability for further short- or long-term service. The Regional Councils maintain lists of these potential pioneers along with their experience and capacities, and as needs are identified, consult with the Local Assemblies to determine where each could best serve.

Preparation for deployment

Through an initial orientation, the pioneers acquire a clear vision of the stage of development and specific reality of the cluster where they will be deployed and the priorities and goals of the community there. They understand that their purpose is to establish a pattern of expansion by training resources from within the local population and accompanying them in action. To enable the pioneers to be more effective in their service from the outset, the institutions became aware that careful preparation within the cluster was essential.

When the institutions reflected on their experience with the deployment of pioneers, they noticed that when they sent them without having made any previous efforts to prepare the friends in the cluster, it took the pioneers three to six months simply to

become acquainted with the local community and build relationships. In cases when they were alone, they needed time and courage to even approach the local population. Often, they would extend their energies across different parts of the cluster to initiate conversations with the local residents. The institutions recognized that the pioneers needed to work on establishing and strengthening a community-building process in one neighbourhood or village first, and that they would need assistance to initiate these efforts. With these insights in mind, the friends decided to give more attention to the preparation phase before the deployment of teams of pioneers.

We introduced a preliminary visit of one or two weeks to the areas identified before deploying the pioneers. During this visit, an Auxiliary Board member or assistant and a member of the Regional Council identify a neighbourhood or village where there is receptivity, and address logistical questions such as where the pioneer will live. A visit to a village may start with a conversation with the chief to introduce the Faith and announce the arrival of the pioneer, which often leads to the chief's family opening its home to the pioneer. Additionally, if there are Bahá'ís already present in the cluster, this visiting team will meet with the local believers to prepare them to welcome the pioneer and possibly offer their home as a place to stay.

Forming teams of pioneers

In thinking about the configuration of teams, we realized that when we deploy one pioneer to a locality, that individual has to face many challenges alone. When there is a team of two, they are able to consult together and support each other. From these observations, we decided to avoid sending pioneers on their own. We also noticed that while youth may have particular ease in opening children's classes or junior youth groups, older believers can be very effective in having conversations with adults and parents about Bahá'u'lláh and His spiritual teachings and laws, and in fostering devotional gatherings and initiating study circles. Once a junior youth group begins, the younger siblings can immediately be involved in a children's class, and then the parents in a study circle.

We have also seen that deploying a family is a very effective strategy, particularly in communities where the Faith has not yet been introduced. We look at the whole family in terms of its members' experience with opening children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, and note the books of the sequence of courses they have completed. The institutions extensively support the family that is ready to arise to serve. Each member—the father, the mother, and the children—plays an important role. Upon their arrival in a village, they are able to build relationships right away.

Providing continued support

While the pioneers are the nucleus of these efforts, we ensure that a support team accompanies them upon their arrival. This team includes two mobile teachers and two mobile tutors along with members of the institutions—usually a member of the Regional Council, an Auxiliary Board member, or an assistant. The mobile teachers stay for two or three weeks as they intensively engage in teaching campaigns and identifying receptive souls alongside the pioneers. Often during

this period, a number of local residents come to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for this age and show eagerness to acquaint their friends and relatives with His Message. After these initial weeks of intense activity, the mobile teachers move on to support pioneering teams in other clusters. The mobile tutors stay with the pioneers for a period of three to six months to provide them with support in consolidating the expansion efforts and strengthening the institute process. In the Kasai region, for instance, the institutions have sent more than 200 people to the goal clusters, including 48 pioneers along with mobile tutors and teachers.

Throughout the months that follow, the pioneers continue to receive assistance. Members of the Regional Council, regional institute coordinators, and Auxiliary Board members carry out joint visits to consult with the pioneers on the progress made and any needs to address. Then, accompanied by the pioneers, they engage in many conversations with the local community about Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings. The very presence of these visiting friends often has an effect on how the local inhabitants perceive the wide reach of the Bahá'í Faith beyond their village. In addition to this support from the institutions, the friends in more advanced clusters nearby—adults, youth, junior youth, and children—visit to work alongside the pioneers during expansion phases and help start core activities.

More recently, what became apparent was the need for a scheme of coordination to assist the Regional Councils to closely follow the efforts of pioneers during their service and to become familiar with their unique capacities and contributions to the community-building process. In all regions, experienced pioneers have been appointed to serve as regional pioneer coordinators. In this role, they collaborate with each team of pioneers—for instance, in preparing for their orientation before deployment, visiting them in the field, and arranging six-monthly and yearly reflection gatherings. These coordinators help the institutions address any challenges observed and capture the experiences and insights gained.

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