

Learning to respond to a global health crisis (Part II)

The Bahá'í world entered the final year of the Five Year Plan amidst a global health crisis which is challenging society and altering the context within which the believers and their friends are endeavouring to advance the process of community building. The Universal House of Justice, in its message dated 9 May 2020 addressed to all National Spiritual Assemblies, called attention to the spiritual forces that every confirmed believer can marshal at the hour of need, and further noted that “it is these forces which endow the community with resilience, ensure its integrity, and keep it focused on its divine mission to serve humanity and elevate its vision of the future”. In their efforts to adapt with high resolve to the prevailing conditions, the friends have drawn on capacities raised over preceding cycles as they cultivated a community spirit through the activities of the Plan.

This issue of *Reflections on Growth* is the second in a series illustrating the ways in which individuals, communities, and institutions are responding to the current global pandemic. In the previous edition, insights were shared about how institutions have identified and responded to the pressing needs within communities devastated by the coronavirus disease. The stories featured in this issue highlight the resourcefulness and initiative of individuals and groups of friends who arose to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of those closest to them, witnessed new possibilities that widen community participation, and found new means to strengthen existing patterns of activity.

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The following account from South America describes how a few families worked together to respond to needs that emerged in a neighbourhood at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

PARAGUAY

As the health crisis brought about urgent needs in the San Vicente neighbourhood in the **Central Asunción** cluster, a Bahá'í couple living nearby became concerned about the welfare of the many families involved in children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Here is how the wife describes the journey that took place as they collaborated closely with a family that is deeply engaged in the community-building process.

From the start of the quarantine, we were very worried about the families in our neighbourhood. From what we came to understand, many of the parents were left unemployed, or working fewer hours than usual. When we heard the devastating news of the circumstances of these families, my husband and I prayed and consulted. We felt it critical to take action to support them in any way we could. We realized that the most important initial step was to appeal for assistance from the Local Spiritual Assembly. After I spoke with its members and informed them about the situation, it decided to meet.

The next day, with the help of some youth, the couple delivered supplies they had purchased to a few of the families in the neighbourhood that the youth felt needed them most. Even though it was a beautiful experience, they began to reflect on the effectiveness of those actions.

We wondered how we could use the Local Assembly's funds in the right way. We felt a lot of weight on our shoulders. While we had many ideas, the one that was always present, and which was the strongest, was that we had to involve our friends from the neighbourhood in this initiative. After a lot of consultation, we finally decided that this was the path we would pursue. The letter from the Local Assembly stipulating what was to be done with the funds also inspired us, as it was addressed to the friends in the nucleus of San Vicente and not just to my husband and me. After we made this decision, we became aware of divine confirmations. The next day, we received a letter from the family of one of the youth; this family was the most actively involved in community-building activities. In their letter, they spoke about an initiative they had organized in the neighbourhood in which some families were preparing snacks and lunches for neighbours. We noted that the friends organizing these lunches were the same ones who participated in Bahá'í activities. They told us that, for the moment, they were managing with donations from the neighbours, governmental organizations, and some neighbourhood churches.

This family lives in a house in an alleyway off Calle Amistad, the street where most of the community-building activities in the neighbourhood take place. One of the eldest youth in the family was the first to arise to serve, advancing through the sequence of institute courses, starting a children's class, visiting families, and involving his siblings and other members of his family. During the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb, the first devotional gathering in that neighbourhood was held in their home, hosted by the grandmother, a dearly loved figure. This inspired many other families around them to open their homes for gatherings of collective worship.

It came as no surprise to us that such a beautiful initiative to respond to the immediate needs during the pandemic was born from this family. Nor was it a surprise that they, along with other families of the youth who participated in educational core activities, took into their hands the responsibility of feeding the children, youth, and adults of the community.

Although the funds had been provided by the Local Assembly, the couple was unsure of the best approach to organizing efforts to provide relief in San Vicente.

We realized that in order to truly have a solution and be able to take action we would have to visit the friends and consult with them face-to-face; it would not be possible to have a real consultation if we stayed at home. The day after deciding this, I went to the neighbourhood, wearing all the necessary protective gear. Though it is barely four blocks from our home, we have always noticed how different the reality is in San Vicente. The differences have become even more evident in these past days. On the streets near us, the houses are fenced in with fortified gates and high walls, with not a soul in sight. But as you approach the San Vicente neighbourhood you find two young men, both protected with their face masks and gloves, handing out bread and cookies to the children. On another block, five women prepare lunch for their neighbours and family members. This is the current reality of the neighbourhood.

When I arrived at the family's home, they welcomed me very lovingly. We read the letter from the Local Assembly together. Two of the youth were given the task of making a list of the families who needed help. In this neighbourhood, everyone knows each other. The list these youth prepared contained not only the surname of each family, but also the names of each of its members, since some families would need more food because they had more than five members. There was no lack of attention to the smallest detail.

We went on to prepare a list of groceries that would be part of the package. This was also a very interesting exercise, as some things that I thought were necessary they did not consider essential, and they added several products that they knew were needed. I thought to myself that I could not have made this list on my own. We went to the supermarket together, excited to share an act of service again after so long. We eventually returned to the neighbourhood with the groceries and arrived just as the meal distribution was about to take place. They invited me to join them if I was able. Although I had some meetings later in the afternoon, I accepted with great joy as I was eager to witness such an act of service.

The meal was being prepared in a wide front yard in one of the last alleyways that comes off Calle Amistad. A young couple live in that house with their three children, one of them a two-year-old baby who was being handed from one person to another while the mothers prepared the stew. I met several mothers of the youth who serve in the neighbourhood. They were happy to see me and grateful for the donations, but also concerned that I take care of myself. I also met another young woman who is a participant in a Book 4 study circle; she and the eldest son of that extended family were separating the bread into individual bags to be distributed to the community.

As I helped out where I could, I thought about how, for so long, it had been difficult for us to work with the parents of these youth because we had never known how to organize ourselves in such a way as to be able to undertake service activities with those residing in the neighbourhood. And here were these families, carrying out these initiatives in a natural way, with their own dynamic and in their own time. I thought about how wonderful it would be to integrate ourselves into this dynamic, and I felt a great desire to find a way to be part of their community.

When the time came to distribute the food, the neighbours began to arrive: young people, adults, children, and the elderly. I was happy to see the neighbours come with their jars of various sizes—requesting stew and bread for all the members of their family, lining up at an appropriate distance with suitable protective measures—knowing that for some this was their only meal for the day. I looked carefully at the happy faces of the youth and mothers who were distributing food at the front gate of that family's home, open to all members of their community, and my mind took me back to the gates and high walls just a few blocks away.

Later that evening, the family began assembling the packages paid for by the Local Assembly with the help of their neighbour and two other youth. As they organized themselves to take the packages to each home, the eldest son of the family instructed everyone to be sure to mention that these provisions were from the Bahá'í community. Every so often a neighbour

would come by to thank them for the gift, and they again emphasized that the gifts were not from them but from the entire Bahá'í community.

As I was thanking the grandmother for our day together, she said to me, “It is important all the neighbours know that this family chooses the Bahá'í way, that we are with you, and that you are part of us....”. I thought at that moment how curious it was that from this very house—where devotional meetings have been held over the past year, and the name of Bahá'u'lláh repeated countless times—such blessings are coming forth, and that the source of well-being for this community is a group of friends in one of its alleys who have been praying and serving in pursuit of its advancement week after week.

The youth quickly finished distributing the food. At the end of the last round, however, they returned in distress, noting that one of the families had been overlooked and no packages remained. Without hesitation, one of the youth hurriedly took their family's package to give away, his face bright with joy. Finally, after a hard day's work, everyone was back at home. We were gathered in a circle when someone proposed ending the day with a few prayers.

The following stories from North America relate the experiences of friends who found creative ways to deepen bonds of friendship and adapt their community-building efforts to the present circumstances.

UNITED STATES

In a newsletter shared by the Area Teaching Committee in the **Washington DC** cluster, which presents a collection of stories from individuals making efforts to adapt their pattern of action to the effects of the health crisis, a youth shares an inspiring personal reflection.

In the beginning of March, I started a Book 1 study circle with two of my friends. Initially I was hesitant to ask them if they were interested in joining this study, so I invited them to a couple of devotional meetings and consulted a Bahá'í friend, who encouraged me to invite them to the study circle; to my surprise they both eagerly said yes!

We had our first meeting in person, but then the coronavirus pandemic reached our city and we were advised by authorities to practise social distancing. Our next meeting was over video chat, and although the world around us was changing rapidly and each of us was trying to familiarize ourselves with our new work reality, we all made time to have our weekly study circle. At the end of this first virtual meeting, both of my friends mentioned how studying the institute materials and reflecting together had elevated their spirits during this difficult time. It brought such joy to my heart to hear them say this. The next day, I invited the participants to an online devotional gathering. I wanted them to experience one, with the hope that, after completing Unit 2 of Book 1 at our next session, they would be inspired to host their own devotional gatherings.

Knowing that everyone had been inside for the previous two weeks and under stressful conditions, I suggested meeting in an empty parking lot, with each of us

bringing a chair and sitting apart, following health precautions. We did just that and it was amazing! At the end of this study circle session we finished Unit 2 and collectively decided to start a weekly online devotional, to which we would invite our family and friends. After consulting on how this devotional would look and who we would invite, one participant felt that some of her friends might not be open to joining it, but another was quick to reply, “What other time than now?”

This experience left my spirit soaring, and I am excited to serve shoulder to shoulder with two friends of mine who have found comfort and meaning in the Bahá’í Writings during these trying times.

In the **New York City** cluster, a teaching team decided to meet online and consult about how to foster a community spirit among their neighbours and friends.

Our teaching team discussed putting our devotional gatherings and study circles online, and grappled with questions about how to continue the educational activities. Through our consultation we decided that each household could write a note to every neighbour in their building, offering to help anyone who is homebound by running errands for them. We also offered to speak over the phone and say prayers online with those who are lonely or isolated. We printed out letters, dropped them in the mailboxes, and waited. The next day, the first response came, beautifully written and shared in a typed letter: “Your note was remarkable. My entire family was truly impressed by your generous spirit and your enormous hearts.”

The letter continued to share more about their family, and at the end they also offered support to us as new parents, including babysitting our son if needed once this ordeal ended. No doubt this connection will only continue to strengthen over the coming weeks and months. While our team had intended to arise and serve our neighbours, we in turn were humbled by the willingness of others to be of service to us.

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