

WALKING TOGETHER ON A PATH TOWARDS RACE UNITY AND ONENESS



Part I

BAHA'I NATIONAL OFFICE EDUCATION & SCHOOLS - 2020

To the Collaborators

Dear Friends:

At a time when the signs of moral decay of society are evident in the deterioration of family ties, the countless permutations of “us” and “them”, the resurgent forces of racism, nationalism and factionalism, it is no small task to nurture the kind of family and community life envisaged in the Baha’i teachings.

It is in this context that the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of the United States and the Office of Education and Schools appointed a task force including a member of the Continental Board of Counselors for the Americas, to generate a family program to increase our collective understanding of our work towards race unity through our participation in devotional gatherings, study circles, and the education of children and junior youth. Race Amity is an integral dimension in the work of community building and it is our watchword. Families play a pivotal role as protagonists towards the emergence of a society that recognizes the nobility of all and our inherent oneness.

To be clear, this family program is not a special intervention pursued apart from the Plan:

“. . . the American believers’ pursuit of the double crusade “to regenerate the inward life of their own community” and “to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation” is something carried out as the friends execute their responsibilities for the Five Year Plan and is not something pursued apart from the Plan. . . Rather, the capabilities of the believers to address the issues of racism afflicting themselves, their families, their communities, and the wider society will be cultivated hand in hand with other capabilities needed to advance the process of entry by troops as they learn to systematically pursue their efforts of community building, social action, and involvement in the discourses of society.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 6 August 2018 to an individual Bahá’í in the United States

With this in mind, the task force set out to create a program in which individuals and families can come together to learn from each other’s experiences and gain new insights in addressing racial prejudice as they walk a path of service with other families.

Embedded in the guidance advancing the spirit of the Institution of Summer Schools is the joyful environment generated by participants, facilitators and school committee members. In an atmosphere of openness and joy, conversation on difficult matters becomes possible and constructive. While participating in this family centered program we ask that all participants avoid contentious approaches in sharing their thoughts and ideas.

“In the Kitáb-i-‘Ahd, Bahá’u’lláh states: “Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book”. Therefore, Bahá’ís must not allow themselves to be drawn into the struggles and conflicting interests that divide many factions and groups of humanity. While we should not be idle in addressing social ills as the process of disintegration accelerates, our aim is not to choose sides in contentious social debates simply to proclaim what we believe to be right. Rather the object of our participation is to learn to elevate discourse and improve practice as we work with others in the search for effective solutions. It is through understanding, sharing, and transforming into practical action the distinctly spiritual and social teachings of the Faith that we can offer our greatest contribution to the betterment of society and to the eventual elimination of those evil tendencies decried by the Guardian: the object of the double crusade.”

The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 10 August 2018 to an individual Bahá’í in the United States

Let this journey be characterized not only with detachment and humility, but a conscious awareness of the nobility of everyone present, regardless of race, nationality, class or age. Let us create an environment where each of us strive to become a contributor of unity walking in a path of service for the betterment of our families, our neighborhoods, our community, our Country and the World.

Break-out Session I

Please read the following case study in your break-out group.

Below is an account of a conversation between a few families attending a devotional gathering in their neighborhood. In your group, please read the following narrative and discuss. The main idea to keep in mind as you read through the narrative is "learning in action":

- How is the conversation enabling people to learn from each other?
- What is it about the dynamics of the devotional gathering which enables these families to talk about freedom from prejudice and racism in an elevated and practical way?
- How is the conversation assisting them to see and acknowledge the beauty of nobility in their family and themselves?

The Turner family lives in a culturally diverse suburb of a large city. Their youngest daughter, Tenisha, is seven years old and is part of a neighborhood Baha'i children's class. Since they were learning to memorize a few prayers, Esperanza, one of the children's class teachers, consulted the Turner family and asked them to host a devotional meeting. She suggested they could invite the other children's families for prayers and a potluck barbeque. The Turners agreed and thought the coming week would be fine.

It took a few home visits to organize it, but Esperanza was happy to see that three families would be able to come, including two of the fathers and one grandmother. Although the families all lived in the same neighborhood and came from diverse backgrounds they had never had a chance to get to know each other or see themselves as friends. Esperanza even convinced her own mother to be there.

At the devotional meeting, each child shared a prayer or Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah he or she had memorized on the theme of having a noble soul. Mrs. Turner was touched by one selection in particular that gave her pause for deep thought:

O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words, #22)

After the children had finished, each family was invited to offer a prayer from its faith tradition, as they were from different church groups. When the prayers were said and done, Esperanza had the children sing a song they had learned together, "Look at Me, Follow Me, Be as I am..." It was Tenisha's favorite.

Mrs. Turner invited everyone to come and eat. Each family had brought a favorite dish, which all the children and older siblings really enjoyed.

As the parents talked casually, Mrs. Turner shifted her position to watch the children sitting and laughing together. A sense of sadness came over her as she reflected on the everyday reality of the country — the fact that there seemed to be an increase in fear, prejudice, and hate towards those different from oneself. Her sense of hope was fading into a moment of despair. Mustering a smile, she turned back to Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, a racially mixed family. “It touches my heart to see these lovely children playing so well together,” Mrs. Turner declared. The conversation led to a conversation on family and raising children.

As fruit and cake were shared for dessert, Mrs. Wilson thanked Esperanza for all she had done for her two boys in the children’s class. “We really see a difference in their behavior and attitude.”

Esperanza was appreciative of all the family support she was receiving. She was especially attentive to elements of the conversation that the families were sharing which were meaningful. She thought it would be helpful to seek their advice on an issue she was facing with the children, and lovingly shifted the neighborly discussion to a somewhat more elevated conversation.

“As you know from the selections we heard during our devotional, one of the lessons we are studying in the children’s class is about the nobility of the soul - how each child is a gem of inestimable value. It is very hard today to have a profound family conversation about concepts such as nobility, especially when we deal everyday with others who do not share this value and are overwhelmed by the divisive forces of society.”

“Like prejudice and racism!” Mrs. Turner spelled out. And all the other mothers were quick to chime in, nodding their heads with deep sighs.

“And all the nonsense on the news and talk shows!” Mr. Turner added.

“This is a conversation every black parent has with their children – especially our youth.” Mrs. Wilson shared. “Especially our sons!”

Esperanza continued, “The whole world is disturbed, suffering and confused, struggling with identity and power. Is not the core purpose of God in revealing religion, to unite all humanity under His love and guidance?”

“Amen,” the Grandmother said, shaking her head, “But this won’t be easy. A lot of blood has and will run in the streets. It’s going to take ages!”

Mr. Turner added, “The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. said, when receiving the Nobel peace prize, *“Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace.”*”

Mr. Wilson then recalled, “And Malcolm X when he visited Mecca, commented seeing *“The people of all races, color, from all over the world coming together as one! It has proved to me the power of the One God.”*”

Esperanza listened carefully to the different observations and insights. She then shared, “I was recently reading a letter from the Universal House of Justice, the international governing body elected by Baha’is from nations all over the world. It wrote: *“A heart that has embraced love for the whole of humanity will certainly be pained when confronted by the suffering that so many endure because of disunity.”* (Universal House of Justice, Jan 18, 2019)

The conversation struck a deep chord in everyone.

“We should have more conversations like this.” Mr. Turner said.

Hearing her father’s voice and words, Tenisha ran over and climbed comfortably into his lap. Looking into his eyes and giving him a big hug, she added, “As a family.”

Mr. and Mrs. Turner agreed.



Please consult with your break-out group and reflect on the following questions. Each individual is encouraged to share her or his thoughts and perspective:

1. What are the elements shared in this case study that helped these families see themselves learning in action in a common vision of oneness?

2. Mrs. Turner was deeply affected by the quotation seeing in each human being, the nobility of the soul. Yet she is also pained by society’s long suffering struggle with prejudice and racism. What does the concept of being created “noble” mean to every member of your family?

3. How might the example in the case study help you and your family tear down the veils of prejudice, suspicion and estrangement in your neighborhood?

4. How might you create spaces in which you can meet and get to know your neighbors from diverse backgrounds, whether black, white, indigenous or from immigrant populations?

5. How does the regular interaction of a devotional gathering and children class build trust among the families of a neighborhood or community?

Break-out Session II

Please read the following case study in your break-out group.

Below is an account where two animators learned in their path of service how prejudice can arise and impact junior youth and families. As in the first session, the main idea to keep in mind is "learning in action." We ask that you read the narrative carefully and discuss together the questions that follow. Think how the process of study, consultation, action and reflection applies across the case study, considering: How is the conversation enabling people to learn from one another? How might the concepts being shared during the conversation help to awaken consciousness, to remove estrangement and suspicion, to inspire unity of thought and oneness?

Mona and Aaron had become animators at an intensive summer camp two years before, having completed several of the Ruhi Books including *Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth*. The cluster junior youth coordinator helped them start their first group in a receptive neighborhood where they live. They now have a core of ten junior youth who attend regularly.

The two animators were concerned when one of the more active twelve year old Baha'is, Katie, texted them that she was sick and wasn't able to come to junior youth group. They decided to go together and do a home visit.

On the walk over Mona told Aaron that the other junior youth had shared why they thought Katie wasn't coming. "It seems that Katie had had a terrible argument with Gloria when the group was last playing soccer. Apparently Gloria called a penalty on Katie; Katie got mad, and they each said some pretty hurtful things. Katie lashed out that because Gloria was black, she should stick to basketball. Gloria responded by repeatedly calling her a racist." Mona paused and added, "I only saw Katie run to her Mom's car. I just didn't know the cause."

When the two animators reached Katie's home, it was clear that Katie's mother, Mrs. Page, knew exactly why they had made a special visit to speak with Katie, but wanted them both to know that what her daughter endured was not acceptable. "Katie is still very upset."

Mona spoke up, "Now that we know what happened, we were hoping to sit down with both Gloria and Katie before the group comes together tomorrow to help them work through any misunderstandings."

"That won't be necessary," Katie's mother interjected. "Mr. Page and I think it's better for everyone that Katie attends the junior youth group across town." Then added, "This junior youth group is..." She tried to find a way to say it politely, "Well... it's just that there are so many non-Baha'is in this group and we feel Katie needs to be more with other junior youth like her -- with other Baha'i youth I mean."

An uneasy silence filled the room. They all looked up to see Katie had joined them, obviously hearing the entire discussion. “I never said I wanted to go to the other junior youth group. I want to be in this group.”

“We’ve been over this already, Katie. Besides you grew up with all the children in the other group. And I hear they are studying *The Advent of Divine Justice*.”

Mona and Aaron exchanged a glance, both hoping for confirmation on how they could help Mrs. Page to better understand what the group was learning. Aaron had a breeze of inspiration and said, “Mrs. Page, you’d be happy to know that the junior youth group recently reviewed the three conditions of spiritual excellence – including freedom from prejudice – the key concepts in *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Katie? Do you remember the quote we learned?”

“Do not listen to anything that is prejudiced, for self-interest prompts men to be prejudiced.”

“You’re already studying “*Advent*” with this junior youth group?” Mrs. Page asked Katie.

“Mom, all the junior youth around the world are studying the same books.”

Mona pulled *Learning About Excellence* from her backpack to let Mrs. Page see what they were studying. “Would you like to read this for us?”

Putting on her reading glasses, Mrs. Page began to read aloud:

“As you seek excellence in all things, you should always be aware of the dangers of pride. All your achievements will come to nothing if you begin to feel superior to others. You should not feel superior to anyone and you must avoid every kind of prejudice, whether related to race, nationality, gender, class or level of education. When a group of people is ignorant, it is easily persuaded that some other group is inferior to it. The resulting prejudice becomes the cause of immense suffering, sometimes to millions and millions of individuals. This happens especially when those who are only interested in their own power and wealth take advantage of people’s ignorance and fan the fire of prejudice in their hearts.

“Prejudice passes from one generation to another; that is why we should not blindly imitate others, but rather be engaged in the sincere search for truth. Search of truth with fairness and purity of heart leads us to the understanding that humankind is one.”

After a meditative silence, Mrs. Page looked up from the material to Aaron and Mona and said, “I owe you two an apology. I spoke with prejudice and was completely wrong in my thinking and words...” After sharing a few prayers together, Aaron and Mona stayed and spoke at length about the beauty of what they were learning with the junior youth group in the neighborhood, especially about being involved in the community around them.

The next day, Mona and Aaron were surprised to see Mrs. Page and Katie come to the neighborhood junior youth group together. Mrs. Page brought a tray of home-made sandwiches. “Katie made up her own mind to be here with everyone in the community,” she said sincerely to Mona and Aaron.

Mrs. Page left the group, looking forward to the animators’ next home visit when she would learn more about how her daughter’s junior youth group was progressing. The group continued their study of *Learning About Excellence* together. Katie volunteered to pass out the sandwiches to everyone and brought the tray over to Gloria to choose. They both knew Mona and Aaron had visited each of their homes separately yesterday, but Katie and Gloria had not yet had the opportunity to talk together with them. They were both nervous and felt awkward.

“Hi,” Katie began.

“I thought you weren’t going to come back,” Gloria said.

“I wanted to.” Katie prayerfully found the courage to share, “I’m sorry for what I said.”

“Yeah. It was pretty mean.”

“I know. I was trying to hurt you because I was hurt and that was wrong. It’s not the person I want to be.”

“I don’t want you to be that person either.”

They both nodded agreeing, and as Gloria took a sandwich they both shared a smile that gave them a glimmering of hope. They still had much to talk about.



Please consult and reflect on the following questions with your break-out group. Each individual is encouraged to share his or her thoughts and perspective:

1. How did Mona and Aaron contribute to a difficult conversation trapped in prejudice, using a humble posture of learning to share about the concepts of nobility and oneness?

2. What might the home visit conversation look like when Mona and Aaron consulted Gloria and her parents about the incident on the soccer field?

3. What might the conversation of Aaron and Mona look like speaking with Gloria and Katie together?

4. When witnessing or experiencing prejudice or racism in your community, what steps can or have you taken with your family to elevate the conversation in light of the nobility of the soul and the oneness of mankind?

5. How might you and your family spend more time together consulting and studying the Writings on the concepts of nobility and oneness? Are there other books or articles you have read that elevate the conversation on race in light of nobility and oneness?

Break-out Session III

During this break-out session, we have the opportunity to practice drawing on the knowledge, experience and wisdom of the members of your community (and cluster) by holding a meaningful conversation when making a “home visit”. With the help of your facilitator, pair up into groups of two families (or teams). Each family will have a turn in both hosting and visiting the other and engaging in conversations that draw on each other’s learning and experience.

Drawing on the examples from the earlier break-out sessions, how would you approach a home visit, to create closer bond of friendships with the other family. You may wish to start with a prayer and talk about the devotional gathering you have attended in the neighborhood or the activities of the junior youth group in the cluster that you are experiencing.

After sharing a prayer, please consult together with open hearts on the following questions:

1. Share the names of individuals or groups who have inspired you through their own example, bringing together in service and unity, people of different races. How and why have they touched your heart?

2. As a family how do think participating in the process of capacity and community building in the Five Year Plan, through involvement in the core activities (devotionals, children classes, junior youth groups and study circles) brings your family hope? How might it help you to become more active in discussing race in America with other families from your community?

You may wish to study and refer to any of the passages below as time and interest permits:

“After a decade and a half of systematic effort, a coherent pattern of activity that advances the growth and development of the Bahá’í community and its greater involvement in the life of society has emerged. The current stage of progress and the challenges that lie immediately ahead are summarized in the Ridván 2010 and 28 December 2010 messages. From this perspective, it is possible to see how the challenge of addressing racial prejudice is an integral part of three broad areas of activity in which the Bahá’í world is currently engaged: expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society.

(Universal House of Justice, excerpt from a letter dated 10 April 2011)

“The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children’s classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action. Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods. There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá’í community. For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Bahá’u’lláh....As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grassroots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly.”

(Universal House of Justice, excerpt from a letter dated 10 April 2011)

“Let us recall the words of our beloved Master, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, reminding us of the priceless opportunity that is ours—to establish once and for all a world filled with divine love and founded on justice, where every soul finds acceptance and fulfills the true purpose of life:

“The Faith of the Blessed Beauty is summoning mankind to safety and love, to amity and peace; it hath raised up its tabernacle on the heights of the earth, and directeth its call to all nations. Wherefore, O ye who are God's lovers, know ye the value of this precious Faith, obey its teachings, walk in this road that is drawn straight, and show ye this way to the people. Lift up your voices and sing out the song of the Kingdom. Spread far and wide the precepts and counsels of the loving Lord, so that this world will change into another world, and this darksome earth will be flooded with light, and the dead body of mankind will arise and live; so that every soul will ask for immortality, through the holy breaths of God.”

(National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, January 31, 2018)

Break-out Session IV

In this two-hour session, we will be devising a plan of action for the coming 13-week cycle in our home and neighborhood: Please divide into small teams of two or three families (ideally from the same neighborhood or community). If your family is the only one from a certain neighborhood or you are attending as an individual, please consider that you are representing your family, and join up with others to create a “multi-neighborhood” or “multi-family” team.

* * * * *

Exercise 1.

“In every land, those who have been attracted to the message of Bahá’u’lláh and are committed to His vision are systematically learning how to give effect to His teachings. ... From every race, religion, nationality, and class, souls are uniting around a vision of humanity as one people and the earth as one country. Many who have long suffered are finding their voice and becoming protagonists of their own development, resourceful and resilient. From villages, neighbourhoods, towns and cities are arising institutions, communities, and individuals dedicated to labouring together for the emergence^[SEP] of a united and prospering world that might truly deserve to be called the kingdom of God on earth.” [The Universal House of Justice, message addressed to “all who celebrate the Glory of God” and dated October 2017, paragraph 5]

1. What does “finding their voice and becoming protagonists” mean to each member of your family?

2. What does it mean to be a protagonist, “resourceful and resilient,” in light of nobility and oneness in the face of racism?

Exercise 2.

“In such intimate settings [the social spaces in which we are engaged for the activities of the Plan], people of diverse racial backgrounds encounter the Word of God, and in their efforts to translate the Teachings into practical action, are able to generate bonds of love, affection, and unity, and to learn what it means to establish a true interracial fellowship that is powerful enough to overcome the forces of racism that afflict them and their society.”

[The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 6 August 2018 to an individual Bahá'í in the United States]

Make a list (Column 1) of challenges and obstacles your family faces, or you might face, as you and others of diverse backgrounds endeavor “to establish a true interracial fellowship” as you carry out together the activities of the Five Year Plan in your community.

Column 1: (My List)

Column 2: (Group Suggestions)

OBSTACLES & CHALLENGES:

POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS OFFERED:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

After filling in Column 1, each family can then share with the group its list of obstacles and challenges. The group is requested to listen carefully, in a humble posture of learning, reflect and suggest possible next steps in relation to the listed obstacles and challenges. Please note the suggestions made in the corresponding lines of Column 2.

Exercise 3.

“The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children’s classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action. Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods.

There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá'í community. For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients—the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism—but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh....As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grassroots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly.”

(Universal House of Justice, excerpt from a letter dated 10 April 2011)

Please stream and watch on Youtube two of the filmed series excerpted from “A Rich Tapestry”: 1) Introduction, and 2) Refresh and Gladden

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SRuCpU0NDI>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSv9rBVJXJQ&list=PL-1DyqXH4GhmQ6ibSHOVB9DsIFOJn1lii&index=3>

Reflect on the following:

1. How might the concept to mix with diverse peoples relate to your neighborhood activities as you befriend and accompany others, be they black, white, indigenous or from immigrant populations to participate as protagonists in devotional meetings, children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles?

Exercise 4.

“The House of Justice longs to hear of bold action being taken by the friends in the United States, who, by implementing the essential activities of the Five Year Plan and utilizing the spiritually transformative power of the training institute, begin to uproot racial prejudice in their neighborhoods.” [The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 22 March 2014 to an individual Bahá’í in the United States – Compilation #8]

1. Based on your learning and experience from the sessions thus far, please consider what “bold action” your family - as a whole and each individual member - might take as you form bonds of friendship, and work with the diversity of friends in your neighborhood to uproot racial prejudice?

2. Which core activity or activities (devotional, junior youth group, children class, study circle) can you be involved in with others in the neighborhood to uproot racial prejudice?

Please share this bold action plan with your group.

AT THE CLOSING PLENARY:

Dear friends, it is our hope that the rich discussion and heartfelt examples shared during these few days together will encourage you once you return home, to immediately contact one or two families in your neighborhood with whom you could collaborate, shoulder to shoulder, on the issue of race unity. Similar to Esperanza, and Mona and Aaron, you will be doing home visits to these families, gradually engaging them in more elevated conversations, and becoming genuine friends. Together you may well overcome different challenges. In so doing will be helping to expand the nucleus of friends who are drawing on the spiritually transformative power of the training institute. This will, in turn, build unity in the community. In the coming cycle, as you bring these families together, feel free to use these materials for collective study and as a basis for elevated discussion in your own home.

We ask that you share your family's plan of action at your 19 Day Feast, as well as at your Cluster Reflection Meeting. May many friends, as a result, be inspired as they work together to uproot racial prejudice – one family at a time.

“Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone; let your heart burn with loving-kindness for all who may cross your path.” ... “What profit is there in agreeing that universal friendship is good, and talking of the solidarity of the human race as a grand ideal? Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless. The wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort.” (‘Abdu’l-Baha Paris Talks, October 16 1911)
