

Spirit of Joy Conference: **Exploring the Sweetness of Prayer**



Indianapolis Baha'i Center
23 September, 2023



Bringing the spirit of the Temple to every home

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 depend 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.

...

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.... 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.

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 Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs for the benefit of all, and ignite countless beacons of light against the gloom of hatred and inequity.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 18 December 2014 to the Bahá'ís in Iran)

Discussion Questions

1. According to the passages above, what is prayer? What are some of its qualities?
2. How can the powers latent in prayer be manifested?

Shoghi Effendi highlights the vital interplay between worship and service:

But however inspiring the conception of Bahá'í worship, as witnessed in the central Edifice of this exalted Temple, it cannot be regarded as the sole, nor even the essential, factor in the part which the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, as designed by Bahá'u'lláh, is destined to play in the organic life of the Bahá'í community. Divorced from the social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific pursuits centring around the Dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, Bahá'í worship, however exalted in its conception, however passionate in fervour, 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 worshipper. It cannot afford lasting satisfaction and benefit to the worshipper himself, much less to humanity in general, unless and until translated and transfused into that dynamic and disinterested service to the cause of humanity...

(From a letter dated 25 October 1929)

An important strategy that has led to dramatically increased rates of participation in teaching endeavours and numbers of core activities in the most advanced clusters has been the effort of the Area Teaching Committee, in collaboration with the Local Assemblies, to encourage the hosting of devotional meetings in more and more Bahá'í homes, thus “laying the spiritual foundations of future Houses of Worship”. It is most heartening to see this process extend to other households in neighbourhoods where Bahá'ís reside and to the homes of youth, junior youth, and children who participate in the educational activities of the community, resulting, sometimes, in hundreds of devotional gatherings occurring every week in a cluster. The challenge before the Area Teaching Committee has been to think beyond merely multiplying this activity and to approach this area of action from the perspective of capacity building, conscious that every devotional meeting, like any other core activity, is a potential portal for growth. This entails raising up human resources who can collaborate with the Area Teaching Committee in promoting devotional meetings. The friends assisting in this way accompany families to become more outward oriented by inviting not only their own kin but also their neighbours, friends, colleagues, and even the entire neighbourhood. The hosts of devotional meetings are also supported in learning not just to share prayers, but to foster profound conversations on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, introduce to the attendants the community-building efforts, and invite them to participate. To systematize this endeavor and promote mutual support and assistance, units of several families have formed around more experienced families.

(From a 3 May 2018 letter by the International Teaching Centre to all Continental Counsellors)

Discussion Questions

3. In what ways might hosting devotional meetings in homes lay “the spiritual foundation of future houses of worship?”
4. How might tens or even hundreds of devotional meetings taking place weekly in our cluster enrich the life of our neighborhoods, communities, and cities?

Working with Groups of Families in India

The Uttar Pradesh region in India is one of the most advanced in the world and has some 10,000 devotional meetings with over 80,000 participants across more than 120 clusters with a program of growth. In order to provide support to such a large number of devotional meetings, the institutions and agencies have had to come up with creative means to unlock the power of initiative among the people at the grassroots. In this respect, one idea the friends in Uttar Pradesh have been learning about is working with groups of families to strengthen the devotional character of the community and spur further growth.

The basic approach involves grouping a number of families with some natural link between them—these could be multiple related families, families residing in a given urban building, or families residing within a certain part of a rural village. The families are usually already connected to the community building process in some way; some may be Bahá'í families, some may be actively participating in Bahá'í activities as a family, but most are the families of children or junior youth in children's classes and junior youth groups. These groups of families look slightly different across the region depending on the reality of the cluster. For example in Delhi, a dense urban cluster where families are smaller, a group of families may involve as many as 10 families all living near each other, possibly in the same building. In Kakori, a rural cluster with larger families, a group of families may involve 5 families all possibly related and living in the same village. Within each group of families an “initiator” is identified who will be asked to take responsibility for convening a devotional meeting involving all of the families in the group. Very active groups of families may meet once a week, while others may meet every two or three weeks. Regardless, the families in the group all rotate hosting the devotional meeting. This helps each family act as a host but in a more manageable way. Also, in this way, the number of friends acting as hosts of devotional meetings also increases.

In addition to praying together, the groups of families will also take a few moments to study a few simple passages from the Writings. Across Uttar Pradesh, as more and more groups of families, are meeting regularly together to pray and study the Writings, the Regional Bahá'í Council assists the process by sending the clusters in the region very simple material every two weeks. The Council has a communications desk that is actively thinking about the different segments of the community across the region and they try to develop materials appropriate for each. Their communications include a regional newsletter but also very simple materials aimed for the groups of families. The materials are usually one sheet with a few selected quotations from the Writings on a given theme of interest, for instance, family life, the education of children, etc. The devotional meetings held with the groups of families themselves are also very simple. Typically, there are no refreshments, perhaps only water is served. As families pray regularly and study the Writings, study circles may also form. The Area Teaching Committee works directly with the initiators of each group of families. They help them in their work, encourage them, and accompany them. Gradually, as their capacity grows, many initiators develop into potential coordinators, for instance. Ultimately, the vision for the gatherings of groups of families is for them to gradually resemble the Nineteen Day Feast as much as possible. The more advanced groups of families are being encouraged to meet every 19 days and have a meeting similar to the Nineteen Day Feast.

The idea of groups of families, each with an initiator supported by the Area Teaching Committee, has been particularly effective in the Kakori cluster, which is now sustaining over 800 devotional meetings. Below are some first-hand experiences from Kakori: “My group consists of five families. In total, there are between 25 and 30 participants. I meet with them every week, we pray, we study the material sent by the Regional [Bahá'í]

Council and we talk about the ideas it contains. We also review the subject discussed during the previous meeting. Also, every week I participate in a meeting with the coordinator for devotional meetings, where we prepare for the next meetings with the group of families. At every devotional meeting, we decide which family will host the next meeting.”

“I started my group of families by visiting the neighbors and having conversations with them. I would ask them how everything was going. They were conversations about everyday life. Little by little, I began to introduce the subject of devotional meetings and the importance of gathering to pray. The conversation gradually evolved. At the beginning, it was challenging because only some members of the families would attend the meetings. I kept talking to the others and explaining that, just as they eat together, it is also necessary to pray and consult together. Little by little, the women were able to participate in the meetings. Another challenge is disunity between some families. They fight amongst themselves, and that is why not all the families would come to pray. We do not know how to face this challenge. We are working to generate this learning.”

(Person in charge of a group of families in the Kakori cluster)

Teaching conference Devotional Gathering Planning Exercise

Part 1:

Do you currently have a devotional time in your home when you and the members of your family come together to say prayers (e.g. daily, weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly)? If yes, Can you write a few sentences about your experiences?

If no, would you like to have a dedicated time of prayer in your home with family or friends? If yes, how often would you like to meet? _____

If you would like to start having a dedicated time of prayer, can you start during the next two weeks (September 24 – October 8)? What date can you start? _____

List the names of anyone you'd like to invite: _____

Part 2:

During this exercise feel free to work in groups

In the case study from the Uttar Pradesh region of India, the strategies for families working together to support one another was discussed. In some cases the families working together were actual families. In other cases the groups consisted of groups of families who were friends, neighbors, or the families of young people participating in the children's classes or junior youth groups.

Can you think of a family or group of families that you are connected to who can be invited to a devotional meeting or to begin co-hosting a rotating devotional meeting like in the case study? It might be helpful to stop and take a few minutes to think. List those families here:

Next, take a few minutes to think of the names of any neighbors, friends, family, or contacts that you might like to invite. Again, feel free to work with others or individually on this exercise.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

With the hope that as many devotional meetings will start during the next two weeks (Sept 24 – Oct 8), when do you think you might host your first devotional meeting? _____

Part 3:

The final step of the Planning Exercise is to look at the Calendar on the next few pages. These calendars extend through April 2024.

Take a few minutes and write on your calendar the time and dates for any “family” devotional you planned in the first section. Next, write in the time and dates for any devotionals you planned with any other families, friends, or neighbors. You may want to make a special mark on the dates when you yourself might be hosting. Take your time on this part and try to fill in your calendar as fully as possible.

September 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

October 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16 <i>Birth of the Báb</i>	17 <i>Birth of Bahá'u'lláh</i>	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

November 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23 <i>Thanksgiving</i>	24	25
26 <i>Day of the Covenant</i>	27	28	29	30		

December 2023

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

January 2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 <i>Martin Luther King Jr Day</i>	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

February 2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26 <i>Ayyám-i-Há</i>	27 <i>Ayyám-i-Há</i>	28 <i>Ayyám-i-Há</i>	29 <i>Ayyám-i-Há</i>		

March 2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 <i>Bahá'í Fast begins</i>	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19 <i>Bahá'í Fast ends</i>	20 <i>Naw-Rúz</i>	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

April 2024

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20 <i>First Day of Riḍván</i>
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28 <i>Ninth Day of Riḍván</i>	29	30				

Summary / Pledge:

- Name: _____
- I plan to host a “family devotional” once a *day / week / month / cycle* (circle one), starting on:

- I plan to be a part of a *Hosting* or *Attending* (circle one or both) a group devotional meeting once *daily, weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, every three months* (circle one). Who do you anticipate will be the members of your group?

- Location of the devotion you plan to host (e.g. NE Indy, SE Indy, etc):

- In which of the following areas would you like accompaniment or assistance from others?
 - Planning or putting together a devotional program
 - Hosting a devotional
 - Inviting others to your devotional
 - Other: _____
- How would you like someone to contact you (check all that apply):
 - Text: _____
 - Call: _____
 - Email: _____
 - Other: _____
 - Do not contact.