

HOLDING
DEVOTIONAL
GATHERINGS

OBJECTIVE:

To develop certain insights and skills necessary to attract heavenly confirmations in service to the Cause in the form of organising effective devotional gatherings.

PRACTICE:

To hold at least 3 devotional gatherings and evaluate them to begin learning from the experience.

INTRODUCTION

You have now completed Ruhi Book 1, which is the foundation for further courses. As a result, you have hopefully been inspired to put some of what you have learnt into action. One of the possible acts of service you may wish to perform is to organise devotional gatherings for the benefit of members of the Bahá'í community and others. This course addresses the question of why devotional gatherings are important, what qualities and conditions are needed to make such gatherings effective, and some practical considerations for creating spiritually attractive environments.

The devotional gatherings you organise may take many forms. They may range from simple and informal prayer meetings in your own home, to devotional meetings in a public venue to which the general public are invited. The concepts explored in this course can be applied to these varied forms of devotional meeting. It is hoped that this course will inspire participants to undertake this form of service, and to use imagination and thought in developing their devotional gatherings.

We will study together these 3 sections:

- The significance of devotional gatherings
- The spiritual conditions and qualities for effective devotional gatherings
- Arising to action: some practical steps

At the end, there are some suggested readings for using at your first devotional gathering.

The Significance of Devotional Gatherings

SECTION 1

SECTION 1

The ideologies that dominated the larger part of this century have been exhausted; at their waning in the century's closing years, a hunger for meaning, a yearning of the soul, is on the rise.¹

In every land we see a growing thirst for spiritual life and moral clarity. There is recognition of the ineffectiveness of plans and programs for human betterment which are not rooted in lives of spiritual awareness and ethical virtue. Who should be better equipped to satisfy this longing than those who are already inspired by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and aided by His Power?²

1. From these statements of the Universal House of Justice we understand that:

There is a rising _____ for meaning.

There is a rising _____ of the soul.

There is a growing _____ for spiritual life and _____.

2. Referring to some of the understandings that you gained in the course, 'Reflections on the life of the spirit', write down a few sentences about how this human need for meaning, the soul, and spiritual life is satisfied.

SECTION 3

We know that prayer, meditation on the Writings, and daily striving to live the Bahá'í life are important for individual spiritual growth, but there are also communal aspects to the spiritual life. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book), Bahá'u'lláh has instructed that in the future every city or town should have a building devoted to the worship of God. In holding devotional meetings we are beginning to put this element of Bahá'í life into practice.

The Baha'i House of Worship is dedicated to the praise of God. The House of Worship forms the central edifice of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar (the Dawning-place of the Praise of God), a complex which, as it unfolds in the future, will comprise in addition to the House of Worship a number of dependencies dedicated to social, humanitarian, educational, and scientific pursuits. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar as "one of the most vital institutions in the world", and Shoghi Effendi indicates that it exemplifies in tangible form the integration of "Baha'i worship and service". Anticipating the future development of this institution, Shoghi Effendi envisages that the House of Worship and its dependencies "shall afford relief to the suffering, sustenance to the poor, shelter to the wayfarer, solace to the bereaved, and education to the ignorant". In the future, Baha'i Houses of Worship will be constructed in every town and village. ³

This vision of the future development of the House of Worship can help us to see the significance of our efforts at this stage of the development of the Bahá'í community, in learning to hold devotional gatherings.

Studying the following three passages from 'Abdu'l-Bahá will help to focus our thoughts on the nature of Bahá'í devotional meetings, and to consider their purpose and the promised results. The same questions are repeated for each passage.

Thou hast asked about places of worship and the underlying reason therefor. The wisdom in raising up such buildings is that at a given hour, the people should know it is time to meet, and all should gather together, and, harmoniously attuned one to another, engage in prayer; with the result that out of this coming together, unity and affection shall grow and flourish in the human heart. ⁴

How does 'Abdu'l-Bahá describe:

The time and place of the meeting: _____

The purpose of the meeting: _____

The results of the meeting: _____

Whensoever a company of people shall gather in a meeting place, shall engage in glorifying God, and shall speak with one another of the mysteries of God, beyond any doubt the breathings of the Holy Spirit will blow gently over them, and each shall receive a share thereof. ⁵

How does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describe:

The time and place of the meeting: _____

The purpose of the meeting: _____

The results of the meeting: _____

We hear that thou hast in mind to embellish thy house from time to time with a meeting of Baha’is, where some among them will engage in glorifying the All-Glorious Lord... Know that shouldst thou bring this about, that house of earth will become a house of heaven, and that fabric of stone a congress of the spirit. ⁶

How does ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describe:

The time and place of the meeting: _____

The purpose of the meeting: _____

The results of the meeting: _____

SECTION 4

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said:

Although to outward seeming the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar is a material structure, yet it hath a spiritual effect. It forgoeth bonds of unity from heart to heart; it is a collective centre for men’s souls. Every city in which, during the days of the Manifestation, a temple was raised up, hath created security and constancy and peace, for such buildings were given over to the perpetual glorification of God, and only in the remembrance of God can the heart find rest. Gracious God! The edifice of the House of Worship hath a powerful influence on every phase of life. Experience hath, in the east, clearly shown this to be a fact. Even if, in some small village, a house was designated as the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar, it produced a marked effect; how much greater would be the impact of one especially raised up.⁷

Questions:

1. Although the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar is a material structure, yet it hath a _____ effect.
2. It forgoeth bonds of _____ from _____.
3. It is a collective centre for _____.
3. Every city in which a temple was raised up, hath created _____

4. What are such buildings given over to? _____

5. Where does the human heart find rest? _____
6. What phase of life is influenced by the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar? _____
7. Is the influence of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar confined to the Bahá’í community? _____

Now write down some of your thoughts on the significance of devotional gatherings to the Bahá’í community, and to the local community in general.

The Spiritual Conditions and Qualities For Effective Devotional Gatherings

Having looked into the significance of devotional gatherings, we will now consider what kind of experience the devotional meeting should offer, and some of the qualities that we need to gain, so that we can learn to hold increasingly effective devotional gatherings.

SECTION 1

The passages which follow give guidance on the characteristics of a Bahá'í devotional gathering.

As to the character of the meetings in the Auditorium of the Temple, he feels that they should be purely devotional in character; Baha'i addresses and lectures should be strictly excluded. ... Shoghi Effendi would urge that choir singing by men, women and children be encouraged in the Auditorium and that rigidity in the Baha'i service be scrupulously avoided. The more universal and informal the character of Baha'i worship in the Temple the better. Images and pictures, with the exception of the Greatest Name, should be strictly excluded. Prayers revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master as well as sacred Writings of the Prophets should be read or chanted as well as hymns based upon Baha'i or non-Baha'i sacred Writings.”¹⁰

As regard the whole question of the Temple and services held in it: He wishes to emphasize that he is very anxious... that no forms, no rituals, no set customs be introduced over and above the bare minimum outlined in the teachings. The nature of these gatherings is for prayer, meditation and the reading of writings from the Sacred Scriptures of our Faith and other Faiths; there can be one or a number of readers; any Baha'i chosen, or even, non-Baha'i, may read. The gatherings should be simple, dignified, and designed to uplift the soul and educate it through hearing the Creative Word. No speeches may be made, no extraneous matter introduced.¹¹

From the above passages, we can find a number of features or qualities which are desirable and undesirable in a devotional meeting. Although a devotional meeting in your home, Bahá'í centre or other place is not the subject of these passages, they do give some ideas about the general character of a Bahá'í devotional gathering. List as many of these as you can:

1. Things which are desirable or qualities to aim for in a Bahá'í devotional meeting:

2. Things which are not desirable or not permitted in a Bahá'í devotional meeting:

SECTION 2

These spiritual gatherings must be held with the utmost purity and consecration, so that from the site itself, and its earth and the air about it, one will inhale the fragrant breathings of the Holy Spirit. ¹²

Ye have written as to the meetings of the friends, and how filled they are with peace and joy. Of course this is so; for wherever the spiritually minded are gathered together, there in His beauty reigneth Bahá'u'lláh. Thus it is certain that such reunions will yield boundless happiness and peace.

Today it behoveth one and all to forgo the mention of all else, and to disregard all things. Let their speaking, let their inner state be summed up thus: 'Keep all my words of prayer and praise confined to one refrain; make all my life but servitude to Thee.' That is, let them concentrate all their thoughts, all their words, on teaching the Cause of God and spreading the Faith of God, and inspiring all to characterize themselves with the characteristics of God; on loving mankind; on being pure and holy in all things, and spotless in their public and private life; on being upright and detached, and fervent, and afire. All is to be yielded up, save only the remembrance of God; all is to be dispraised, except His praise. ¹³

1. In what manner must the spiritual gatherings be held? _____

2. What might be the 'fragrant breathings of the Holy Spirit'?

3. What qualities must we ourselves strive to gain, if we are to hold gatherings in this manner?

4. What are the meetings of the friends filled with? _____

5. Who reigns over these gatherings? _____

6. Why is it certain that the meetings of the spiritually minded will yield boundless happiness and peace?

7. How should our speaking and our inner state be summed up? _____

8. What is to be yielded up? _____

9. What is not to be yielded up? _____

When answering the following question, it may be helpful to remember times and places where you yourself have felt spiritually uplifted, and felt a connection with God.

10. Which qualities, when present in a devotional gathering, will most help to bring spiritual joy and upliftment to those who attend?

SECTION 3

The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted.¹⁴

...in every aspect of life, purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement, exalt the human condition and further the development of man's inner reality. Even in the physical realm, cleanliness will conduce to spirituality, as the Holy Writings clearly state. And although bodily cleanliness is a physical thing, it hath, nevertheless, a powerful influence on the life of the spirit.¹⁵

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments - in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit - therefore, it is most certain that a true voice causes deep pleasure.¹⁶

Write down some practical ways in which the environment for the devotional meeting can be made pleasing and conducive to spiritual feelings:

Scenarios:

When selecting readings and prayers, bear in mind these words of Bahá'u'lláh:

Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them...¹⁷

First, decide what your target group will find uplifting and inspiring. Are you aiming at people who are comfortable with prayer? If so, you may want to include some prayers. If not, it may be better to use only readings. Reason suggests, and experience has proved, that many spiritually minded people are attracted by the beauty of the Bahá'í prayers, but it is easy for anyone to be overwhelmed and become tired if the prayers and readings are too long or too 'heavy'. Try to choose prayers and readings of a style and length which will be reasonably easy to follow.

Will you have prayers, readings or both? _____

Who will select these?

Who will choose the music?

It is important to select people who can clearly and eloquently read the selected passages. There should be at least two readers who take turns reading throughout the programme. The readers should practice reading aloud in advance of the meeting, and get used to any background music.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 155
- ² Universal House of Justice, 28 December 1999
- ³ Aqdas: Notes, pages 190-191
- ⁴ Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá , pages 94-95
- ⁵ Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 94, # 56
- ⁶ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, page 94
- ⁷ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 95-96, # 60
- ⁸ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 153
- ⁹ Universal House of Justice, 28 December 1999
- ¹⁰ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, April 2, 1931
- ¹¹ From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, April 11, 1947
- ¹² Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, pages 93-94
- ¹³ Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, page 93
- ¹⁴ 'Abdu'l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 52
- ¹⁵ Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, pages 146-147
- ¹⁶ Abdu'l-Bahá: Compilation of Extracts from the Bahá'í Writings on Music, page 7
- ¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh: The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, page 74

Some useful resources

Readings

Selections of readings on various subjects can be found in these books available from the Bahá'í Publishing Trust:

The 'Jewels' series of quotations from `Abdu'l-Bahá : Love, Happiness, Forgiveness, Contentment, Friendship, Hope.
'Prayers and thoughts for peace'.
'Meditation' by Wendi Momen.

Many Bahá'ís have the Writings in electronic form and can search for quotations on different subjects.

Music

There are many professional recordings available of prayers set to music, available from the Bahá'í Publishing Trust, and this can add beauty to your gathering.

Web sites

<http://www.tranquillity-zone.org.uk>

<http://fp.borderline.f9.co.uk/sacredspace>

Suggested readings for devotional gatherings open to all

Suggestion for the start of a devotional meeting

- You could begin by setting the scene by using this poem:

*Close the door for just a while
And seek the peace within.
Shut out the world and all its noise
And let the silence in.
Close your ears for just a while
Until you only hear
That still small voice that whispers
All is well for you are here.*

- Or you can prepare a visualisation to begin the programme – take the participants on a short meditative journey (about 3-5 minutes). You can ask them to imagine walking into a beautiful garden, or taking a journey on a boat to an island. You can practise all kinds of wonderful visualisations to take your guests to a serene and beautiful place. This is where they find out that spiritual peace is deep in the heart, quietly waiting to be discovered. This is a place of calm and tranquillity which they take away with them and which they can visit at any time.
- And/or a quotation:

“O my friend! Listen with heart and soul to the songs of the spirit and treasure them as thine own eyes.” Bahá’u’lláh

Reflections on the Life of the Soul

Man – the true man – is soul, not body; though physically man belongs to the animal kingdom, yet his soul lifts him above the rest of creation. The soul it is which makes the human creature a celestial entity!

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

A body doth not develop and grow without the soul; therefore the soul is the medium of the spiritual life.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Know verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.

Bahá’u’lláh

Verily, I say, the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty ... Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending.

Bahá’u’lláh

Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God ...

To consider that after the death of the body the spirit perishes is like imagining that a bird in a cage will be destroyed if the cage is broken, though the bird has nothing to fear from the destruction of the cage. Our body is like the cage, and the spirit is like the bird. We see that without the cage the bird flies ... therefore, if the cage becomes broken, the bird will continue to exist ... In truth, from hell it reaches a paradise of delights because for the thankful birds there is no paradise greater than freedom from the cage.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Reflections on peace

There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God.

Bahá'u'lláh

It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him that loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.

Bahá'u'lláh

Consort with all religions with amity and concord, that they may inhale from you the sweet fragrance of God.

Bahá'u'lláh

For blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow creatures. Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind.

Bahá'u'lláh

Because man has stopped his ears to the Voice of Truth and shut his eyes to the Sacred Light, neglecting the Law of God, for this reason has the darkness of war and tumult, unrest and misery, desolated the earth.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

In the estimation of God all men are equal. There is no distinction or preference for any soul, in the realm of His justice and equity ...

In the estimate of God, there are no English, French, Germans, Turkish or Persians. All these in the presence of God are equal; they are of one race and one creation; God did not make these divisions. These distinctions have had their origin in man himself ...

We are of one physical race.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Reflections on true life

.... True life is not the life of the flesh but the life of the spirit.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

No matter how much man may acquire material virtues, he will not be able to realise and express the highest possibilities of life without spiritual graces.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Man is in reality a spiritual being and only when he lives in the spirit is he truly happy.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

True bounty is that of heaven, spiritual, which gives life eternal. Follow this and thy heart will become as beautiful as a garden, thine eyes bright, thy spirit happy and thy thought a comfort to souls.

We must look higher than all earthly thoughts; detach ourselves from every material idea, crave for the things of the spirit.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

... human happiness is founded upon spiritual behaviour.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

The body without spirit is not capable of real accomplishment. Although it may be in the utmost condition of beauty and excellence, it is, nevertheless, in need of the spirit.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

... All the sorrow and grief that exist come from the world of matter - the spiritual world bestows only the joy!

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilisation are linked and co-ordinated will happiness be assured.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Reflections on coping with stress

O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved, I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life. O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O God.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Joy gives us wings! In times of joy our strength is more vital, our intellect keener. But when sadness visits us, our strength leaves us.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Remember not thine own limitations; the help of God will come to you. Forget yourself. God’s help will surely come!

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Should prosperity befall thee, rejoice not, and should abasement come upon thee, grieve not, for both shall pass away and be no more.

Bahá’u’lláh

I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the Royal Falcon on the Arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.

Bahá’u’lláh