

# ARTICLE

## What difference do we make?

How busy, happy and engaged are we, in a wide range of activities serving the community around us and re-shaping its community life?

At the beginning of the Four Year Plan, my old community held regular exhibitions in the centre of our town. One time an unhappy-looking young couple walked in and looked around. The young woman asked a few questions did we have a church, where did we meet, what sort of meetings and activities did we have, and so on. I gave her a leaflet, told her about the spread of the Faith and how it fulfilled other religions .... She asked me, "What difference will it make?" Meaning what difference would being a Bahá'í mean to her and her partner.

I have been puzzling ever since how best I should have answered her.

We Bahá'ís have become experts at giving talks to each other

When I mentioned this to a friend whose opinion I respect, she said that often for new Bahá'ís coming into the Faith, it is like stepping into air - there is so little for them to do, no activities to join in, to contribute and feel part of the community. I don't know if this is true everywhere, but it did make me think: if you join a church, you have services every Sunday (at least), and there will be meetings every day of the week in the church hall for one group activity or another. If you become a Bahá'í: there will be a Feast every nineteen days, a Holy Day celebration every now and again, you might even have to serve on the Assembly if it was below numbers ... and what else? I have a sinking feeling there can be a bit of a vacuum. And if there are other activities, they may well be by Bahá'ís for Bahá'ís - someone once said to me that we Bahá'ís have become experts at just giving talks to each other ...

Another Bahá'í whom I respect immensely, discussing this question of community life, said what we had yet to get to grips with was the House's call for social and economic development. The Universal House of Justice has been writing to the Bahá'ís of the world about this for many years, but we haven't really come to terms with it in this country - or have we? We are very good, and please don't let us stop, at supporting schools and projects in far away countries, but where are our home based projects? Is our British society so good it doesn't need us?

The reason I raise these questions is because they may be a key to our relative lack of success in enrolling new believers. I've been a Bahá'í for more than forty years. I have seen goodness knows how many teaching campaigns (and served on some of the committees which organised them), and if they had all achieved their goals, the Bahá'í Faith would probably be our state religion by now.

### Do we expect our campaigns to fail?

I've seen campaigns calling for, "each one, teach one", and "everyone to say 500 Remover of Difficulties each day (or week)"; for us to "mention the Faith to someone new each day"; for "everyone to hold a fireside every nineteen days", goals set for so many new believers by such and such a date, special campaign prayers ... the list goes on. I know no effort for the Faith is wasted, but I do wonder how effective some of these campaigns have been. And because they have not all been totally successful, whether we now expect to fail, or at least not to care very much if we do or not.

Which brings me to social and economic development and our community life. Over 25 years ago, the Universal House of Justice told the Bahá'ís of the world that it was, "a firmly founded, busy and happy community life" which would provide the friends with "courage and strength and loving support" for their teaching work. (1) The Promise of World Peace (1985) described the Bahá'í community as, "engaged in a wide range of activities serving the spiritual, social and economic needs of the peoples of many lands" (2).

The 26 November 1999 message from the Universal House of Justice speaks of, "projects of social and economic development, which seek the spiritual and material upliftment of entire communities" carried out by the Bahá'ís, and "penetrating society at the grassroots." Looking back, I am staggered at how many times this theme has been repeated over the years. In 1994, the House of Justice wrote to an Assembly that, "a distinguishing characteristic of Bahá'í life (is) the spirit of servitude to God, expressed in service to the Cause, to the friends and to humanity as a whole". (3)

So how busy and happy and engaged are we in a wide range of activities serving the wider community around us, re-shaping its community life?

The Guardian wrote about this as long ago as 1941: "This Cause is a Cause which God has revealed to humanity as a whole. It is designed to benefit the entire human race, and the only way it can do this is to re-form the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual." (4)

Sixteen years ago, the Universal House of Justice told the Bahá'ís of the world (Ridván 141): "An upsurge of zeal throughout the Bahá'í world for exploration of the new dimension of social and economic development is both heartwarming and uplifting to all our hopes. This energy within the community, carefully and wisely directed, will undoubtedly bring about a new era of consolidation and expansion, which in turn will attract further widespread attention, so that both aspects of change in the Bahá'í world community will be interactive and mutually propelling." May not this have something to do with "promoting entry by troops"?

When Shoghi Effendi said the most effective method of teaching was the fireside, he said it was because, "new people .... can feel there the true Bahá'í spirit - and it is the spirit that quickeneth." (5)

### **What is this true Bahá'í spirit?**

So what is this true Bahá'í spirit and how should our community life reflect it if not by being busy and happily involved in the community? The House of Justice told us: "... people will never embrace it (the Faith) until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking in the world ..." (6)

So I ask myself, what was it that the young couple who came into our exhibition so conspicuously lacked? Did they need to be told about the Faith's global vision, or were they, like so many others, concerned more about personal problems - like where do we sleep tonight; family breakdown, or how to bring up our children to be courteous and respectful, and to avoid drugs and under-age sex? - there isn't room for a full list is there ....? What were their problems they wanted answers to? After all, while the Faith isn't a counselling service, the Guardian did say the Bahá'í Faith, "is not a mere philosophical or social doctrine". (7)

Surely it was something which we Bahá'ís should be able to deliver - a busy and active community life in which new believers could readily participate: engaged with the wider community around us, promoting a happy and fulfilling social life, and looking for ways in which we can stimulate and serve the economic well-being of our community?

Just how are we, as a community, working together to improve our economic circumstances (we might even solve the chronic shortfall in the National Fund)?

We need to remember the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá - after all, what was it He did that gained Him a knighthood - if not a social and economic project? The House of Justice described His example as: "a dynamic that permeates the activities of the Faith .... (and which) acquires collective, transformative force in the normal functioning of a community." (8)

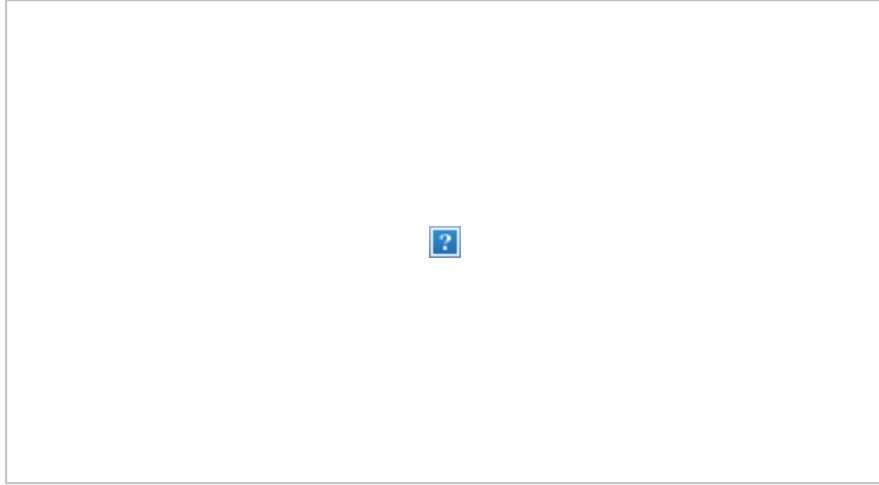
"Dynamic", "collective" and "transformative" are words that appeal to me .... how about you?

Andrew Gash

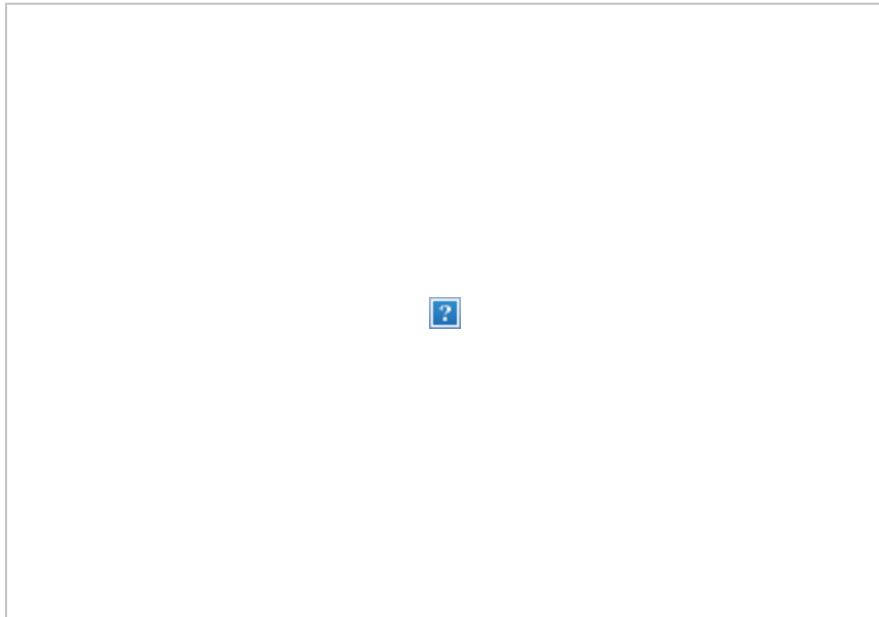
References:

1. From a letter dated Naw Rúz 1974 to the Bahá'ís of the World
2. Peace Message, para 56

3. Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the NSA of USA, May 19, 1994
4. From a letter dated 14 October 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two believers, Lights of Guidance, #1405
5. From a letter dated 20 October 1956 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Lights of Guidance, #2000
6. From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the NSA of Bolivia, August 19, 1985
7. From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, August 13, 1936, Lights of Guidance, #1570
8. Letter from the Universal House of Justice to the NSA of USA, May 19, 1994



**Bahá'í exhibition at Green Fayre in Kingston, 29th May. Dianne Mahboubi and a visitor to the stall, with other helpers.**



**Prince Charles visited Brent Inter Faith Centre, 10th May. He is photographed here, receiving a posy of flowers from Yasmin Afnan from the local Bahá'í community.**