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# Attaining the dynamics of growth

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*Glimpses from  
five continents*

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Prepared by the  
International Teaching Centre  
Bahá'í World Centre

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BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE  
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# CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
To the delegates attending the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention . . . . .	2
London, <i>United Kingdom</i> . . . . .	5
Norte del Cauca, <i>Colombia</i> . . . . .	15
Bihar Sharif, <i>India</i> . . . . .	25
Tiriki West, <i>Kenya</i> . . . . .	35
South Tarawa, <i>Kiribati</i> . . . . .	45
Acceleration of Learning . . . . .	55

To the delegates attending the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention

In just a few years, the intensive programme of growth has emerged as a powerful means for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith on a large scale. Leading the process of learning that impels progress are scores of clusters where the friends have, through painstaking, systematic effort, come to understand how best to implement the cycles of activity that constitute such a programme. So instructive is the experience of these clusters, we asked the International Teaching Centre to choose one example from each continent and prepare a document that would demonstrate at once the diversity of conditions in which the believers everywhere are labouring and the coherent vision that unites them as they advance the process of entry by troops. The document consists of five case studies and a closing analysis. It is inspiring indeed, and we commend it to your study.

While the case studies offer an impressive account of the activity in each cluster, you will, we hope, not be content only to read the narrative but will try to identify the principles, qualities, and approaches that have made possible the progress achieved. What should become clear to you is how aptly the friends and institutions in the clusters have managed to exploit the framework for action referred to in our 27 December 2005 message to breathe the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation into places as diverse as the crowded city of London and the tiny island group of Kiribati.

Immediately apparent from the description of all five clusters is the degree to which the friends have relied on the power of divine assistance; this has fortified them in the field of action and enabled them to persevere in the face of inevitable difficulties. Equally evident is the sense of purpose that animates their endeavours—a purpose complemented by the attitude of learning they have espoused. Even more striking, however, is the way these attributes are perpetuated in the body of believers as it grows in size, for in all cases they have come to characterize not only individual action but also the community's as a whole. So focused is the collective energy of the friends as they carry out the central tasks of the Five Year Plan, whether in taking individual initiative or participating in organized campaigns, that they are catching the first glimpses of what it means for their powers to be multiplied in unified action.

In reading the case studies, you will note how the approaches adopted and the system of administration employed serve as means for facilitating the dynamics of such unified action. In every cluster, fellowship and support are the watchwords in this respect. Whether they are paying a visit to a family's home to draw them into a conversation about the Faith or helping one another to perform acts of service as part of their study of the institute courses, it is the joy of accompanying other souls on their spiritual journey that motivates the believers.

This same motivating force guides the institutions and agencies operating in the cluster in their efforts to administer the intensive programme of growth. Clearly the complexity of the coordination schemes in the five clusters varies to some extent. Yet, irrespective of the level of complexity, the administrative mechanisms in place represent a response to the desire of an increasing number of friends who are eager to express the ardour of their faith in action; these provide them with the support needed to participate in teaching teams, to host devotional meetings, to conduct children's classes, to form junior youth groups, and to establish study circles. That the institutions and agencies involved are able to maintain such a responsive form of administration testifies to the high degree of organizational skill and flexibility they have attained.

In the closing analysis, the International Teaching Centre examines the strategies being employed to transfer the experience gained in advanced clusters, such as the five described here, to those in earlier stages of growth. The effect of such transference has been remarkable. What sometimes required several years for the friends in one cluster to accomplish can now be learned in another in a relatively short span of time. Often within a matter of months, as pointed out by the Teaching Centre, a dynamic pattern of activity, reflecting the equal emphasis placed on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation, can be established. Invariably, the believers take immediate ownership for the programme of growth, and unity of thought is soon reached. As they begin to put into practice what they have learned through the study of institute courses, especially related to direct teaching methods, they see their efforts confirmed and preconceived notions about the lack of receptivity fall away. Their commitment to the process of growth is raised to higher and higher levels as they are drawn into decision making at the reflection meeting. Plans laid down by the institutions and agencies serving the cluster become increasingly effective as their ability to interpret the experience acquired by the friends is gradually sharpened. They are able to think strategically, to set priorities, and to use resources judiciously. Moreover, they identify believers capable of shouldering added responsibilities in pursuit of plans and channel the energies of growing numbers in service to the Cause. The community thrives as it lovingly embraces new believers. In short, the process of capacity building in the three protagonists of the Plan accelerates at a tremendous rate. It is this development that heartens us most and which gives us confidence that the potential of the Five Year Plan will be realized.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
Ridván 2008



Teaching  
Children's Classes  
Grade 1

Book 3

UNBERGIN

# London

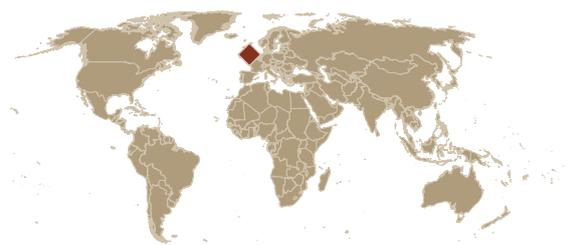
## *United Kingdom*

The experience of the London cluster is a lesson in mobilizing teaching teams and transforming attitudes to the expansion of the Cause in what was deemed an “unreceptive” area.

Like many other large cities, London had long been seen as a place where it was especially difficult to teach—in spite of the fact that a direct teaching project undertaken in the Hackney borough between 1992 and 1997 clearly showed heightened receptivity among the Afro-Caribbean, Turkish, and Kurdish populations. Unfortunately, the project lacked adequate means to deepen newly enrolled believers and build community life. Without enough active teachers and effective strategies, only a handful of the significant numbers of individuals and families that entered the Cause developed a strong Bahá’í identity.

In 2001, at the outset of the Five Year Plan, London was divided into seven clusters. One that showed particular promise for growth was London City East, which included the site of the Hackney project. Following consultations with the Counsellors, the institutions and agencies there decided to address the deficiencies of the earlier teaching project by taking a campaign-like approach to raising up human resources and by making specific plans that would allow every willing individual to join a study group and progress rapidly through the sequence of institute courses. In that way, new believers would immediately assume a sense of responsibility for the progress of the Faith and would themselves arise to become active teachers.

When this approach was presented at a reflection meeting, the idea of an intensified effort met



### Cluster at a Glance

- Area 1,610 square kilometres
- Largest city in western Europe: population 7.5 million
- Over 40 percent of inhabitants belong to “minority” groups, especially Africans, Caribbeans, and Indians
- City divided into 33 boroughs (local municipalities)
- Bahá’í community numbers around 1,000 with a high proportion of friends from Iranian background
- Local Spiritual Assemblies in 29 boroughs
- Second intensive programme of growth in Europe (April 2005)
- First Bahá’í in London was Mary Virginia Thornburgh-Cropper, a member of the first Western pilgrim group in 1898
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá visited in 1911 and again in 1912–13
- Site of the resting place of Shoghi Effendi



with a strong positive response. Within a few months, a company of some 30 believers, many of them young people, had successfully engaged friends of the Faith in neighbourhood children's classes, devotional meetings, and home visits. This experience led the way for other clusters in London where the believers were beginning to see the transforming effect of the institute process on the work of expansion and consolidation.

### **Preparing and Launching the Intensive Programme of Growth**

In early 2005, the decision was taken to amalgamate London's seven clusters into one, the combined resources of which now made launching an intensive programme of growth possible. The focus of the new Greater London cluster's first reflection meeting, held in preparation for the programme's launch, was twofold: to carry out a campaign of home visits and to identify potentially receptive friends, family members, neighbours, and co-workers. The ground-work that was laid in this preparatory period proved critical to the success of the programme's early cycles.

Only weeks before the launch of the intensive programme of growth, a cluster-level scheme of coordination was established. The Bahá'í Council for England, in consultation with the Counsellors, appointed an Area Teaching Committee, consisting of five friends with experience in the institute process. A cluster institute coordinator was then named, as was the first children's class coordinator for the cluster.

Time was short, and much work lay ahead. To begin the programme, friends who had completed institute courses would need to be strategically mobilized. There had been some experience with seekers in core activities in the past but not on the scale required. Would efforts to mobilize the friends in the intensive programme of growth meet with success? The excitement felt by members of the Area Teaching Committee was mixed with considerable anxiety—feelings heightened by the knowledge that theirs was only the second programme of growth in all of western Europe. There would be no examples to follow along the way.

The results of the first cycle of activity far exceeded expectations. More than 150 believers participated in some way in the expansion phase, a noteworthy accomplishment, given how few had previously considered themselves teachers of the Cause. The confidence of the friends was greatly boosted, and the spirit at the well-attended reflection meeting was elevated, determined, and galvanic.

The objective of the institutions and agencies serving in the cluster had been to increase substantially the number of seekers involved in core activities, to learn about teaching, and to witness some growth. The number of the friends of the Faith engaged in core activities rose dramatically from 40 to 133, and six enrolled as Bahá'ís. Without doubt, the possibilities for growth were significantly greater than anticipated. But beyond the measurable results, it was clear that the friends were becoming increasingly audacious in reaching out to people, using the tools acquired from the training institute courses such as home visits and teaching teams to shape their endeavours. As the account of their victories reverberated in far off lands, the friends in London were further confirmed in their efforts.

## Learning about Teaching Teams

From the outset of the intensive programme of growth in London, teaching teams have played a pivotal role in propelling the process. In general, teams have focused on inviting people to core activities, which, of course, has involved them in sharing the Message, to a greater or lesser extent in each case. Much work was undertaken to prepare the initial teams for the first cycle of activity in order to ensure success.

Like military strategists mobilizing an army, the cluster agencies with the assistance of the Auxiliary Board members began by looking at the list of believers participating in the institute process, especially those who had completed Ruhi Institute Books 6 and 7, and by identifying groups of friends living reasonably close to one another who could form three- or four-member teams. A potential coordinator for each team was contacted and asked about possible members, and through such a process of consultation the first teams emerged. The role of the team coordinators would later prove essential for ensuring the flow of information, advice, resources, and encouragement between the large numbers operating on the ground and the cluster agencies—a flow imperative for this army of intoxicated lovers of Bahá'u'lláh to function properly.

A simple outline of what teaching teams would actually do was produced and studied, first with the team coordinators and then with all members. The Auxiliary Board members took the lead in this work, and because there was little experience operating in teaching teams and only limited experience with individual teaching, these concepts had to be carefully examined. The materials aimed at underscoring one point above all else: the expansion phase was a time to teach, and to teach with an intensity beyond any previous efforts. Of the 30 teams formed in the first cycle, perhaps 12 were effective in engaging their contacts in core activities. Though concerned about the less effective teams, the Area Teaching Committee was advised to be confident that the learning from the most active ones would soon spread to others—an approach that has been proven by the consistent increase in the number of effective teams from cycle to cycle.

The stories from the teams during the first week—of overcoming fears, making successful home visits to share prayers, teaching in small firesides,



inviting colleagues to devotional meetings—reinforced many of the ideas they had studied earlier and strengthened their appreciation for the new mode of working. Excitement was palpable. Inspiring stories were collected and shared to encourage others. They were also used in later cycles to advance the friends' understanding through reflection on real experiences.

Confidence to teach the Faith to people the believers already knew was a key attitudinal change that occurred in the early stages of the programme and developed into new, more effective, habits over subsequent cycles. Many believers initially felt inhibited, assuming that people in their immediate circles would not be receptive. Through experience, however, teachers saw that when they presented the Faith in a natural way, their friends, family members, neighbours, and co-workers responded positively with remarkable consistency.

As the teams entered the field of action, they experienced the immediate power of prayer and began to rely on it increasingly—a habit that has been strongly encouraged by the institutions, as a means both for attracting divine assistance and for keeping in the forefront the immensely exalted and spiritual nature of the enterprise. The plan for each cycle of activity continues to include a special prayer campaign in which all are invited to take part.

With up to 50 teams spread across more than 30 communities in London, it has been a challenge for the cluster agencies to keep in touch with them to support their efforts. Yet the ability to work shoulder to shoulder with the teams has gradually increased throughout the cycles, as the Area Teaching Committee members have acquired personal experience and have themselves become more confident in their approach to accompanying the friends in their efforts. Likewise, the teams' skills and understanding have also developed as they have gained experience in the field. By the end of the sixth cycle, there was a strong culture of inviting friends to Book 1 without hesitation.

### **Study Circles as Environments for Teaching**

As in other places, study circles have offered a fertile environment for teaching, but this potential has only gradually been realized as the friends have overcome inhibitions to teach. Experience has demonstrated that many barriers are removed by studying Book 6. Several friends have even remarked that their

habits of thought were so ingrained that they did not shed their inhibitions to share the Message until they had served as tutors of the book a few times.

Further, some tutors have managed to establish a pattern of growth based on the courses of the institute. These believers form study circles and assist the seekers after the completion of each course to carry out the relevant core activity with a growing network of friends of the Faith. By accompanying participants in this way through the study and practice of Books 1 to 7, they are able to systematically multiply the number of those who have the capacity to help others become dynamic teachers of the Cause. The story of one tutor illustrates the kind of transformation that can occur.

**Vida** facilitated her first study circle as the result of the efforts of a teaching team member who was not yet enrolled in the Faith. The team member arranged a daytime study circle for eight mothers, only two of whom were Bahá'ís, offering to take care of the children while Vida facilitated. Quite nervous at the start, with the new participants looking at her expectantly, Vida later confessed, "I could hear my own heart beating." Despite her nervousness, the first sessions went well; the participants were enthusiastic and her confidence quickly began to build. Through her own efforts and those of the Auxiliary Board member and the cluster coordinators who accompanied her in the field, Vida's skills developed markedly. From her first study circle with mothers, a children's class naturally emerged. Several participants were nurtured and embraced the Faith through home visits, firesides, and devotional gatherings. Other teaching opportunities opened up as these individuals began to move through the sequence of courses and, in turn, to teach the Faith, so that a pattern of growth has now emerged. Two years later, Vida is serving as a resource person—even travelling to other countries where the believers struggle with certain tasks related to growth, accompanying the friends in making home visits and helping them to confirm souls in the Cause. And the original teaching team member formally enrolled in the Faith in the seventh cycle!

## Glimpses of Growth

As a result of the efforts exerted by the believers in the London cluster, the tempo of teaching is steadily gathering momentum. The table below provides relevant statistical information from the first through the eighth cycle of activity, which concluded in January 2008.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH
No. involved in teaching activities	156	106	147	115	129	143	114	75
No. youth and adults enrolled during cycle	10	9	10	6	8	11	10	8
Total no. individuals enrolled during cycle	12	12	12	6	9	12	10	8
No. new believers entered in institute programme	10	7	7	3	6	11	10	8
No. seekers in core activities at end of cycle	133	124	120	128	150	140	180	131

It is noteworthy that 86 per cent of the youth and adult new believers have entered the training institute process, and nearly half of these are active in the teaching field. Several became members of teaching teams straight away—in a few cases before they formally declared—and are regarded as some of the most natural teachers. Without old habits or attitudes to discard, they see training as an opportunity to gain skills to effectively share the Message they have embraced, and so they respond with eagerness to invitations to undertake

further study of the institute courses. On occasion, they even recall fondly the cycle of activity during which they joined the Faith!

## **Decentralizing Children's Classes**

Before the launch of the intensive programme of growth, many of the children from Bahá'í families in London attended one of the weekly centralized "community schools" held in three localities, to which parents living outside the city brought their children as well. Only one or two children from families where the parents were not Bahá'ís attended these schools. Following a decision of the National Spiritual Assembly, such schools were closed so that resources could be focused on initiating neighbourhood classes that would be open to all.

It has been a slow and sometimes difficult process of transition to a culture that places importance on extending Bahá'í education to children of all backgrounds. Yet, with experience, the value of neighbourhood classes has become more and more apparent, and as the following story shows, the children from Bahá'í families are not only developing a strong Bahá'í identity through the classes but are also becoming agents of growth in a completely natural way.

**Florence and Abigail** The openness of children and their natural ability to teach became clear when Florence, one of the Bahá'í children, said to her friend, "We have no school tomorrow, because it's a Holy Day." Her friend, an eager participant in Bahá'í children's classes, told her mother that she, too, would like to observe the Holy Day. Puzzled, the mother called the children's class teacher, who explained that the Bahá'í children had permission to stay home from school on this sacred anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, a Manifestation of God. The mother, who was not a believer or participant in any core activity, then called the school and gave permission for her daughter to take the Holy Day off, too. Mother and daughter attended the Holy Day commemoration, and the child continues to be one of the most enthusiastic children in the class, firmly identifying herself as a Bahá'í.

Abigail, a six-year-old who was also attending Bahá'í children's classes, decided to conduct a devotional meeting at home for her parents. She invited them to sit on cushions she had prepared, and she played some music. When Daddy began to read his prayer too soon, she explained that they must read their prayers in turn, with a pause between each one. Abigail's mother, who was studying Book 1, was very touched by this experience with her daughter and soon after declared her faith.

One young mother who was appointed as a children's class coordinator during the fifth cycle gained a good deal of experience in inviting neighbourhood children to her classes and in taking their parents through the sequence of institute courses. She has seen the evolution in the friends' understanding of the nature of Bahá'í children's classes and their place in a process of growth. At first, conversations among Bahá'ís tended to revolve around whether it was prudent to stop operating the centralized Bahá'í Sunday school. Then, with the focus on working locally, conversations shifted to learning how to invite children to classes and what to say to their parents. From there, consultations moved on to the highly practical question of how to work with the many children who were attending the classes. How to invite the parents to core activities was the next stage. The question most pressing before the friends at this



point is how to invite the receptive souls from among the parents to formally enrol as Bahá'ís. The story of one mother's efforts illustrates the tremendous possibilities that open to those who step forward to teach children.

**Julia** started a regular children's class with her daughter's friends, whose mothers were also learning about the Faith from her, and gradually acquired the capacity to conduct classes themselves, overcoming obstacles as they arose. One of the most welcome challenges was learning how to invite her study circle participants to enrol in the Faith. She tells the story of one such experience:

"My friend and I got together after the first session of the Book 1 study circle. She had some questions and as we consulted about them, she seemed to be trying to articulate something. 'What makes us different? How is it that you are a Bahá'í and . . . and I'm not a Bahá'í? What is the difference between you and me?' I responded that I understood a Bahá'í to be someone who accepts that Bahá'u'lláh has God's Message for today, and that being a Bahá'í is a realization that comes to our heart. At some point we realize that we believe. She responded, 'But I do believe that. I realized it almost the first time we spoke of it together.'

Julia has accompanied several of these mothers through Book 3 and beyond. They are now Bahá'ís, conducting children's classes and vigorously contributing to the process of growth.

Of the 15 children's classes in London, 13 include children from families that are not Bahá'ís—and those involved are engaged in an intense process of learning. As experience accumulates in forming junior youth groups, the coordinators for children's classes and junior youth groups are finding that working together ensures that these two core activities reinforce one another.

## Looking Forward

Eight cycles, spanning two and a half years, have seen the enrolment of 81 new believers in London. The effect of this accomplishment on the members of the teaching teams, most of whom had no previous experience with their friends and families becoming Bahá'ís, has been profound. Yet, even with intense prayer and effort, it is not proving easy to accelerate further the rate of enrolments in London. A number of important challenges must now be met: raising the number of effective teachers; ensuring that teaching in the expansion phase reaches the necessary level of intensity; supporting the work of the teams adequately; and, above all, enhancing the ability to identify segments of the general population with heightened receptivity to Bahá'u'lláh's Message.

Until now the teaching teams have principally reinforced individual initiatives—albeit on an increasingly larger scale. The next frontier of learning is collective action in the teaching field. In the eighth cycle, the introduction of a special teaching effort aimed at receptive populations in selected neighbourhoods, engaging a few of the most audacious and experienced teams with a higher level of organization, coordination, and intensity of action, has opened up new prospects for growth.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited London in 1911, He told the friends that it was the attractive force of their love that had drawn Him to that city. Furthermore, He said, "In the world of existence there is no more powerful magnet than the magnet of love."<sup>1</sup> Today, as the believers in London strive to share the Divine Message with the diverse souls who now make up that city, they are conscious that their success is directly related to the increasing ardour of their all-encompassing love for their fellow citizens, who come from almost every



conceivable background. Deep in the hearts and minds of the friends resonate the Master's words about the diversity he found among the Bahá'ís in London: "You are all, of every race and creed, members of one family. The teaching of Bahá'u'lláh constrains you to realize your brotherhood to one another."<sup>2</sup> Yet they know, too, that goodwill is not enough for 'Abdu'l-Bahá also advised them, "These meetings here in London are good, the knowledge and the intention are good, but how can there be a result without action?"<sup>3</sup> It is through their unflagging efforts in the Plan's framework for action that the friends in this cluster have found effective instruments to convey their ever-growing measure of love for humankind.



1 *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London: Addresses and Notes of Conversations* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987) p. 79.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 54.



# Norte del Cauca

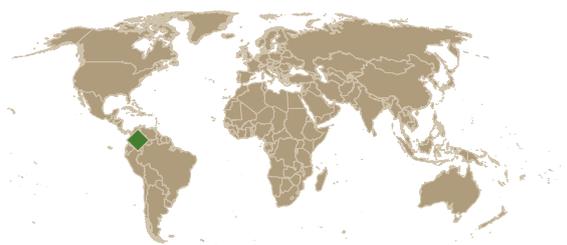
## Colombia

At the end of October 2007, the Bahá'ís in Norte del Cauca held a reflection meeting that marked the close of their cluster's 10th cycle of activities.

The meeting venue overflowed with some three hundred adults, youth, junior youth, and children who had come to join in joyous celebration and take part in serious and disciplined consultation, from all of which they would derive further spiritual sustenance. As the friends separated into groups according to the core activities with which they were involved, the institutions and agencies serving the cluster felt a deep sense of gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh not only for the large turnout but also for the high level of maturity demonstrated by these active and dedicated souls.

The process of learning about expansion and consolidation in Norte del Cauca reaches back to the 1960s, when a small group of Bahá'ís from other parts of the country started to visit the area. Teaching methods gradually evolved that enabled them to bring large numbers into the Faith, and over time they developed a systematic approach to visiting newly enrolled believers—now reflected in Book 2 of the Ruhi Institute curriculum—in order to support them. It was also during these initial years that social and economic development projects, which would have a tremendous impact on the region, began to be established. Of particular note were those initiated by the Bahá'í-inspired organization Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de las Ciencias (FUNDAEC) in an effort to elaborate and implement the concept of a university for integral development.

In the years that followed, teaching efforts became increasingly systematic, but the goal of



Norte del Cauca  
COLOMBIA

### Cluster at a Glance

- Located in southwest region of Colombia, just south of Cali, the country's third largest city
- Population approximately 235,000
- Majority of inhabitants of African descent
- Dominant religion Catholicism, mixed with African traditions, giving rise to religious syncretism
- Seven semi-urban towns and several dozen rural village communities, divided into seven municipalities, ranging in population from 5,000 to 50,000
- Region where the Ruhi Institute was born
- Long history of learning about large-scale expansion, as well as Bahá'í-inspired efforts in social and economic development
- Originally five clusters; amalgamated into one in late 2004
- One of the first clusters to launch an intensive programme of growth in Colombia (February 2005)



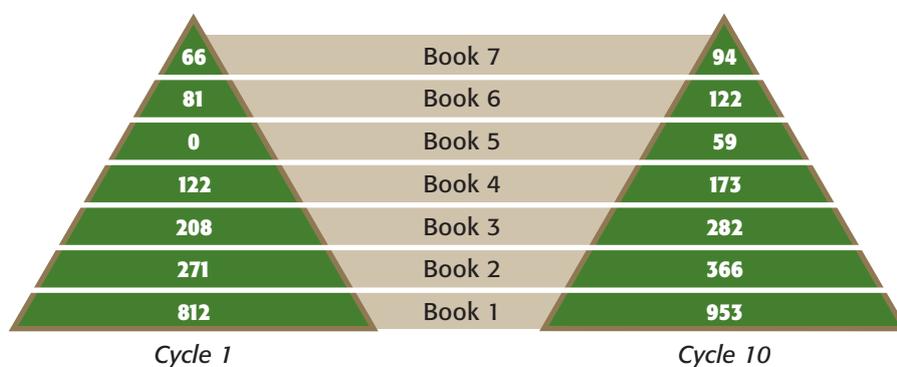
sustaining them from within the area itself by the local population remained elusive. In time, the establishment of the Ruhi Institute would prove crucial in raising up human resources for this purpose. In its early stages, however, the Institute focused much of its efforts on bringing youth from all over Colombia to a central facility for training, most often in the context of a year-of-service programme, from where they would be dispersed throughout the country to work in villages, carrying out what are now known as core activities. This practice began to change at the start of the Four Year Plan in 1996 when the guidance of the Universal House of Justice shed new light on Bahá'í experience worldwide with expansion and consolidation. Subsequent years finally brought the internal development of human resources at the grass roots so long hoped for. By 2005, 812 people had completed Book 1 in the sequence of courses, 208 friends had been trained as children's class teachers, 81 individuals had completed Book 6, and 45 were actively serving as tutors of study circles. From such a position of strength, the friends in the cluster launched their intensive programme of growth, and the years since have ushered in a new phase in the history of the Faith in the area. More than 1,500 people in Norte del Cauca have now joined the Bahá'í community, raising the population to 4,300, including children, youth, and adults.

While teaching the Faith has never been difficult in the area, it is the capacity within the cluster to balance and sustain the complex elements of

a programme of growth that now makes a difference. Through three years of continuous activity, the believers have acquired a greater consciousness of their responsibility to contribute to creating the unique features of Bahá'í community life—a consciousness that is evident in their level of enthusiasm; in their concern for educating children and junior youth; in their desire to receive training to carry out acts of service; in the degree of their participation in the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day observances, and devotional meetings; and in their eagerness to give to the Funds of the Faith. Reaching this point has not been easy. It has required intense activity, punctuated by as many moments of struggle as those of joy. Plans and organizational schemes have often needed adjustment when results fell short of expectations, and the conditions of life in the area have posed persistent challenges to the believers.

### Developing Human Resources

Despite the long history of teaching in Norte del Cauca, the first cycles of the intensive programme of growth lacked emphasis on expansion, and attention focused primarily on involving a higher number of the Bahá'í population in the institute process. The initial 45 friends available to serve as tutors were able to attend to close to 400 people studying the sequence of courses, and the ratio has been maintained throughout subsequent cycles. However, the mobility of the population in the cluster, especially of the youth, who often migrate to the cities to find work, has made it difficult to increase the human resources residing in the area, as indicated by the table below. In fact, a substantial number of those who have completed the books in the sequence are not reflected in the table as they have long since left the cluster.



The challenge of working with such a mobile population has required that the cluster coordinators be flexible in their approach. Most participants take the courses in study circles, but they also have access to two- or three-day intensive sessions offered at various sites on the weekends, especially for the higher courses in the sequence. Those involved in study circles, sometimes in coordination with other groups working through the same material, are also encouraged to organize periods of intensive study for an afternoon, a full day, or a weekend. This combination allows the system of delivery to be adapted to participants' availability.

The stories of two young women, Rosa Elena and Monica, illustrate how the agencies operating in the cluster have learned to systematically identify, prepare, and mobilize individuals who have become vital human resources.

**Rosa Elena** The cluster's current coordinator for junior youth groups is Rosa Elena, a young woman native to the area who participated in Bahá'í children's classes and then a junior youth group in Chalo, a small community with a population of 1,200. During the period of the first Five Year Plan, she was studying the sequence of institute courses. By the time the first cycles in Norte del Cauca's intensive programme of growth began, Rosa was offering a year of service with a close friend from her community in a distant part of the country. When they returned, the two started to study rural education at FUNDAEC's University Centre. Soon the coordinator for junior youth groups identified Rosa Elena as someone with the capacity to support the activities of the institute, particularly junior youth groups. As a first step, the coordinator helped Rosa to start her own group in Chalo, accompanying her as she invited participants and visited their parents. From there, Rosa began to accompany others in forming new groups. For months, she worked closely with the coordinator to learn the skills necessary to coordinate the junior youth activities of the cluster and animator training. By the time the previous junior youth coordinator left during the seventh cycle, Rosa Elena was able to take over as the coordinator in addition to pursuing her studies.

**Monica** is a young woman who lives in the small community of Yarumales. She first heard of the Bahá'í Faith when the children's class coordinator arrived at her house by mistake, searching for local Bahá'ís who might be encouraged to start classes. All of the friends the coordinator had set out to visit had either moved away or were unavailable, but Monica showed interest in her description of a Bahá'í children's class and responded positively to the offer to work with her in starting one. With the help of the coordinator, Monica was quickly able to study the necessary books in the institute sequence and gain practical experience in teaching lessons. Weeks later, Monica was conducting the class in Yarumales by herself. Seeing her strong interest in education, the coordinator encouraged Monica to enrol in the undergraduate programme in rural education at FUNDAEC's University Centre. During the first semester of her studies, Monica declared her belief in Bahá'u'lláh and became actively involved in Bahá'í activities in the cluster. She has continued her study of the sequence of courses and is now working with the institute, accompanying others in their efforts to form and sustain children's classes. Every other Monday, she and a handful of others study with the institute coordinators and consult on their endeavours to support the growth of institute activities. The vitality of Monica's faith has spread to those around her, and in recent cycles of activity Monica's mother and all of her siblings have become Bahá'ís.

## **Mobilizing the Friends to Teach**

When the programme of growth was launched in Norte del Cauca in 2005, some believed that the receptivity of the local population had diminished since the 1960s and '70s, and this, they thought, accounted for the slowness with which expansion gathered momentum. However, as the cycles of activity progressed and those who were taught the Faith responded enthusiastically, this misconception dissipated. In fact, experience showed that not only were people still receptive, but the Bahá'í Faith was viewed with admiration because of its positive influence in the area over the years.

Although receptivity remained high and past teaching methods were still effective, the institutions and agencies serving the cluster soon came to the realization that the magnitude of the work demanded a more focused approach



than had ever been previously adopted. They would need to learn how the friends could best be mobilized to carry out regular teaching campaigns during the expansion phase of each cycle and how new believers could be rapidly incorporated into community life.

Following a series of adjustments to plans and operations on the basis of learning on the ground, viable organizational arrangements emerged. Currently, in every local community where a teaching campaign is scheduled to take place, one person is selected to organize activities. He or she is assisted by one or two friends who are appointed for each cycle as cluster-level coordinators for the campaign. These coordinators identify a core group of teachers for each community, consisting of both active teachers residing in the locality itself and others from different parts of the cluster. Those who offer to participate in the effort during the reflection meeting are added to one such core group. Information related to the campaign—the names of teachers participating each day, the number of individuals visited, and the names of those who declare—is recorded by the coordinators in a notebook that is passed to the Area Teaching Committee. At the end of the expansion phase, all those who have participated gather to celebrate the result of the teaching efforts, share stories, and reflect on their successes and the challenges they encountered. In the most recent cycle, 90 people were present at this gathering.

With the current approach, a two- to three-member teaching team makes a pre-arranged visit to a home. Equipped with a visual aid seen as a precursor to the more extensive presentation in Book 6, the team members take about thirty minutes to an hour to explain the essential aspects of the Faith to their hosts. Since they hope to create an intimate spiritual relationship with those with whom they converse, time is always made available for questions and discussion. At the end, after having explained what it means to be a Bahá'í, the teachers ask those present whether they would like to be part of the local

Bahá'í community. Most of the believers in the cluster have come into the Faith as a result of this invitation.

The individuals visited are not strangers to the Bahá'í community. At the beginning of each cycle, the coordinators of the expansion phase, working with the cluster agencies, make a list of the names of individuals suggested by Bahá'ís in the cluster—many of whom are parents of youngsters who attend children's classes or junior youth groups or are friends of the Faith who participate in devotional meetings and study circles. On average, one out of every three individuals who are taught the Faith accepts it, and most others remain interested. The believers recognize that this success is, to a significant degree, dependent on the highly charged spiritual atmosphere of the campaign.

The average number of people who currently participate in collective teaching efforts for more than two days in each cycle is around 90. Others teach on an individual basis or participate for a shorter period of time.

The immediate task following the expansion phase is to tend to the needs of the newly enrolled believers. This is done in large part through study circles, junior youth groups, children's classes, and devotional meetings, as well as through systematically organized visits to homes during the consolidation phase of every cycle. Most such visits are carried out by those studying the second book of the sequence of courses, and it is generally expected that by the time new believers have received five home visits, they will begin to feel integrated into the community. While there is a longstanding tradition of home visits in the area, the number of families reached per cycle—between 80 and 95—is still not sufficient. Efforts to increase this number are under way. In each cycle, the Area Teaching Committee sets aside a day dedicated to visits, encouraging community members to make a personal commitment to continue calling on families and individuals throughout the rest of the cycle.



Nevertheless, experience suggests that making such visits a distinct feature of Bahá'í community life will require time as the friends are gradually assisted in their efforts to understand better the dynamics of this activity.

Perhaps what has proven most effective are the efforts made to form study circles with those who enrol during the expansion phase. A new believer, working with the institute coordinator or with someone who can act as a tutor, is encouraged to make a list of friends, family members, and neighbours who might be interested in participating in this activity. An invitation is extended for them to learn about the institute programme, and a study circle is then formed with those who express a desire to attend. Often a group of this kind will advance through the study of several courses together. In the Norte del Cauca cluster, this has become a means both for raising up new human resources and systematically expanding the list of friends of the Faith, creating the dynamics that perpetuate growth.

### **Multiplying Core Activities**

The emphasis placed on the practice component of the institute courses, as an integral part of their study, has had a considerable effect on the multiplication of study circles, devotional meetings, children's classes, and junior youth groups. Equally important have been the efforts exerted to accompany the friends as they begin to consciously walk a path of service to the Cause.

When initial attempts were being made to expand the number of devotional meetings in the cluster, a member of the Area Teaching Committee systematically visited individuals who had completed the first book of the sequence and held workshops for all who were interested in starting their own devotional gatherings. She also provided them with materials, helped them to develop lists of people they could invite, and worked closely with each host. As the number of devotional meetings grew beyond the capacity of one person to coordinate in this way, the Area Teaching Committee began to think about cluster activities in terms of four routes. Now the hosts of devotional meetings in communities on each route receive visits during one specific week, and in some communities individuals serve as contact people to assist others in starting devotional meetings. Regular contact with key people on the routes has helped to identify believers with the potential to organize activities for the cluster. And thus, a system is evolving to support individual hosts in various communities without the direct involvement of the Area Teaching Committee member in each one. Among the most essential lessons recently learned is that devotional gatherings formed around families are more regular and long-lasting than those organized by study circles or junior youth groups. The table below shows the steady increase in participation in this activity over several cycles.

<b>CYCLE</b>	<b>1ST</b>	<b>2ND</b>	<b>3RD</b>	<b>4TH</b>	<b>5TH</b>	<b>6TH</b>	<b>7TH</b>	<b>8TH</b>	<b>9TH</b>	<b>10TH</b>
No. devotional gatherings	52	68	80	101	131	145	113	135	126	129
No. participants	522	737	776	968	1,193	1,563	1,227	1,365	1,269	1,258

The number of children's classes has expanded by working directly with teachers in their own villages. As shown in Monica's story, when the children's class coordinator identifies individuals with a particular interest or the capacity to teach children's classes, she makes a special effort to help them advance quickly through the necessary institute courses. She also accompanies them in

their efforts to identify children to join their classes, to visit their parents, and to carry out their first few lessons. She then continues to assist by providing materials, support, and further training to the teachers.

When the classes are first offered in a locality, many begin with large numbers of children—in fact, too many, in some cases—but this eventually settles down. The nature of life in the area is such that the number of overall participants has fluctuated since the beginning of the intensive programme of growth, as seen in the table below. However, the number of regular participants is gradually rising, and the Bahá'í community is now able to attend to the educational needs of around 1,500 children. The current challenge is to reach a point where there are separate classes for each age group in every village.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH	9TH	10TH
No. children's classes	66	72	79	85	91	81	89	95	97	99
No. participants	1,263	1,459	1,331	1,737	1,851	1,416	1,525	1,525	1,335	1,358

Longstanding experience in working with young people aged 12 to 15 in Norte del Cauca has contributed significantly to their enthusiastic participation in junior youth groups, and the number of such groups has nearly doubled since the early cycles of activity. The institutions and agencies in the cluster have set a goal of having a totality of 1,000 junior youth benefiting from the spiritual empowerment programme, in one or another of its three levels, at the time of the close of the current Five Year Plan. Having experimented with various ways of administering this core activity, the junior youth coordinator currently works closely with several collaborators who accompany those serving as animators in different communities in the cluster.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH	9TH	10TH
No. junior youth groups	24	30	32	35	37	39	38	38	42	44
No. participants	236	312	336	344	378	407	400	400	413	429

## A Spiritual Enterprise

Back in the joyful atmosphere of the Norte del Cauca reflection meeting, it is clear that the believers do indeed have something wonderful to celebrate. It is the achievement of a long-held, deeply cherished dream for their area: to learn how to systematically develop the capacity of the friends who live there—the capacity to administer a complex network of coordinators who accompany hundreds of children's class teachers, junior youth group animators, tutors of study circles, and teaching teams; the capacity to make decisions through a process of action and reflection that gives the cluster's organizational structure a high degree of flexibility and enables corrections and adjustments to be made to plans when difficulties arise; the capacity to translate a vision of reality into coherent and consistent action that is leading the Bahá'í community towards substantial, sustainable levels of growth. All of this heralds further cause for celebration in the years ahead.

But the believers in Norte del Cauca are keenly aware that these developments, important as they are, represent only the outer manifestations of a far-reaching spiritual enterprise in which they are engaged—an enterprise which, through the 30 years they have been walking this path, has gradually



suffused the culture of their community with purpose and united them at a profound level. They understand all too well the forces of disintegration at work in the world. They live them in the context of Colombian society, and they plainly see the immense need for the transformation called for in the Bahá'í Teachings. Their spiritual development has moulded their intellectual advancement to the point where their analysis and understanding of the structures and forces shaping society are now exerting influence on the wider community in which they live. Their conversation is the spiritual conversation that flows from the Writings, from the quotations deep in their memories and hearts, from the concepts that the institute courses elaborate, and from the acts of service in which they engage. They are aware of the Divine Hand that guides and sustains their efforts. They know where they are standing. They know where they are going. And they know that by remaining undeviatingly aligned with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they will get there.





# Bihar Sharif

## India

Responding to an appeal for friends trained through the institute process to assist certain communities in the Bihar Sharif cluster in India, Shraavan decided to devote his attention to Palni, a village with virtually no Bahá'í activity about four kilometres from his home in Tetrawan.

Shraavan, already actively serving as a tutor in his own community, began visiting Palni weekly, but he met with a cold response. The people were suspicious of his intentions, asking him, “What do you get from this?” and “How will we benefit from doing what you are asking us to do?” Still, Shraavan persevered, and eventually he was able to establish a study circle. Though he continued to be treated with mistrust, he visited the village regularly and worked with the study circle participants. Then the monsoon season arrived. The stream separating Tetrawan from Palni flooded, and the only way to cross it was to wade through chest-deep water—which Shraavan did. When the villagers saw the degree of his commitment, their attitude softened. The success of the study circle, together with his spirit of devotion and service, attracted many people to the Faith in Palni, which now has a vibrant community with five devotional gatherings and two children’s classes. Shraavan’s efforts also inspired other Bahá'ís in his home village to become more involved in core activities. Such sacrificial and active participation stands in marked contrast to the apathy that pervaded the area only a decade and a half ago. The Bahá'í community in Bihar Sharif has been transformed from the grass roots up through the acts of individuals such as Shraavan, empowered



### Cluster at a Glance

- Located in the state of Bihar, in northeastern India
- Population 1.2 million
- Predominantly rural
- About 1,200 villages, with average population of 1,000
- Two municipality towns: Bihar Sharif and Rajgir
- *Panchayat* is basic unit of civil administration for groups of 10 villages
- Economy primarily based on agriculture and farm labour
- Bahá'í Faith introduced to the area in the 1950s
- Early site of large-scale expansion and consolidation
- Among the early clusters in India to launch an intensive programme of growth (March 2005)

through the unified efforts of the institutions and agencies in the cluster. But beyond this, what is most noteworthy is the capacity the community has developed to administer large numbers of activities and to welcome into its warm embrace growing numbers of seekers.

### **First Steps on the Path to Sustained Growth**

Bihar Sharif was one of many places that experienced large-scale expansion in India in the 1960s. The Faith was introduced to the area in the 1950s by a dynamic woman named Rasoola, who taught and served the Cause steadfastly even in the face of persecution and social boycott. During those years of intensive teaching, local efforts were supported by visiting teachers. Successful teaching projects opened many villages to the Faith, and a youth cultural group travelled from village to village, proclaiming the Message of Bahá'u'lláh through song and drama. Summer and winter schools, along with courses at the Permanent Teaching Institute, served as the primary vehicles for consolidation, and though they initially generated enthusiasm in the participants, they did not increase the friends' capacity to engage in a sustainable process of growth. In the 1990s the area witnessed a gradual but steady decline in Bahá'í activity. Deepening efforts did not stimulate or meet the needs of the Bahá'ís; the state-level institutions were not able to support the communities, which led to a loss of focus; and many active believers left the area for economic and other reasons.

The reinvigoration of Bihar Sharif was achieved through a series of steps. In 2000, children's classes were established by a few youth who had completed the first three books of the Ruhi Institute in an intensive study. The following year, a simple plan to offer institute courses in three communities was created and implemented, giving the institute process a thrust in the area.





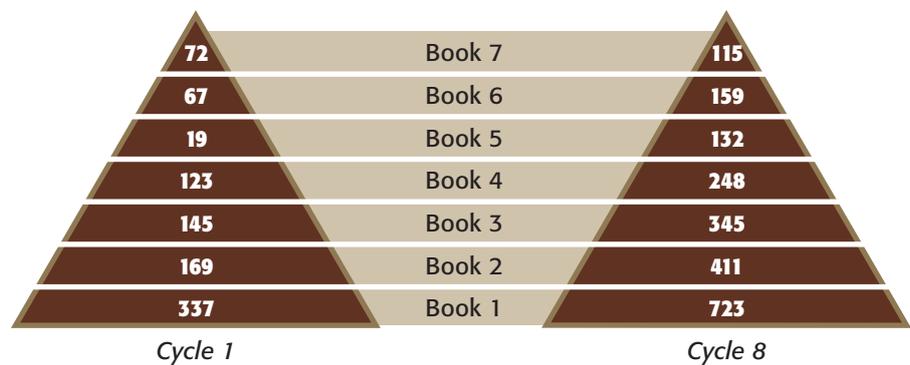
The process was further strengthened in 2002 when the first study circles were started by a group of friends trained to act as tutors in a regional campaign. The introduction of the reflection meeting came next. The primary instrument for accelerating growth in Bihar Sharif, reflection meetings provided a venue for planning institute courses locally and for sharing experiences, especially among those serving as tutors; they galvanized believers like Shraavan to action, bolstered their enthusiasm, and strengthened their sense of ownership of the process of growth that had been set in motion.

Soon all of these initiatives began to bear fruit. There was a gradual increase in the number of children's classes, and activities directed towards junior youth were introduced. Devotional gatherings were recognized not only as occasions for the spiritual upliftment of souls but also as portals to growth, and a special campaign to multiply their number provided a major impetus to growth in the cluster. Those attending devotional gatherings began to flow seamlessly into study circles, and regular visits to the area by the Auxiliary Board members and institute coordinator helped to maintain a high degree of motivation among those serving as tutors. Eventually a scheme of cluster-level coordination took shape, with the appointment of a cluster institute coordinator and an Area Teaching Committee served by a full-time secretary. This contributed greatly to a further multiplication in the number of core activities, and there was a sustained increase in study circles from mid-2003 onwards.

By 2004, conditions seemed propitious for launching an intensive programme of growth, with 56 individuals having completed Book 7, 42 devotional meetings, 11 children's classes, 13 junior youth groups, and 8 study circles. The initial cycle of activity failed, however, to achieve most of its objectives. Following reflection and consultation, the friends decided to try again. Their new plan was more strategic. They identified several communities that would receive particular focus during the upcoming cycle and categorized them according to their strengths and potential. Members of the cluster agencies

visited these communities to elicit their participation. The new cycle, which came to be regarded as the cluster's first, was then launched through a series of community-based prayer meetings. While the planning for this cycle had been better, it was too long—seven months—and little differentiation was made between the expansion and the consolidation phases.

An acceleration in growth finally occurred in the second official cycle, when the agencies began to calculate the capacity of the communities in the cluster, as well as the receptivity of the local population, by reviewing relevant statistical information from the previous cycle. As a result of this kind of analysis, the friends in the cluster embraced the vision of integrating 1,000 new participants per year into core activities, placing emphasis on raising the number of children's classes and junior youth groups—a vision which they are gradually transforming into reality.



## Building a Pattern of Sustainable Growth

Through eight cycles of an intensive programme of growth, the friends in Bihar Sharif have consistently advanced in their learning about how to manage large-scale expansion and consolidation, as the Bahá'í population in the cluster has expanded from around 1,200 at the time of the launch to more than 2,100 by December 2007. In the process, the cluster agencies have developed the capacity to address the challenges associated with administering the affairs of large numbers.

**Effective Teaching Teams.** Throughout the cycles, there has been a steady rise in the number of friends teaching at their own initiative and participating in teaching teams, as well as in the number of communities opened to the Faith through their efforts. With the support of the Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies, teams now teach intensively and systematically during the expansion phase, and the increasing alignment of their approaches with skills acquired through the institute process has boosted confidence. Teams have become more and more successful at inviting seekers to core activities, and over 70 per cent of the new believers have now entered the institute process. Home visits have found a new purpose in addition to deepening: they have become a potent teaching tool in this rural setting, and individuals and families who receive home visits from a teaching team usually join a core activity by the second visit.

**Empowering Women.** Historically, the percentage of women in the Bahá'í community in this region of India has been low, at about 10–15 per cent, in



spite of many programmes conducted through the years to address the imbalance. In the Bihar Sharif cluster, however, efforts to reach out to women—aided by the formation of a special teaching team—have been very effective. The proportion of women in the Bahá’í community there has risen to over 40 per cent, and the confidence with which they participate in activities is evident in the fact that they are directly responsible for about 25 per cent of the core activities in the cluster. Women now ensure that their children attend Bahá’í children’s classes, and young women are arising to serve as animators of junior youth groups, becoming role models for the youngsters with whom they work. The stories below illustrate the ways in which three women of the cluster have courageously stepped forward to put into practice the knowledge, skills, and insights they have acquired through their study of the institute courses.

**Sarita, Anita, and Kiran** To address the challenge of low participation by women in Bahá’í activities in Bihar Sharif, a small number of them from different parts of the cluster were quickly prepared to act as tutors and assisted in initiating study circles with other women. One of these was Sarita, who, after completing the study of Book 7, did something which, given existing cultural and social practices in Bihar, bordered on the heroic: she went to her paternal village of Daryapur and started teaching the Faith there. She visited regularly and soon formed a study circle for women, accompanying 16 of the participants through the sequence of courses. She continues to visit the community, extending to her new spiritual sisters her loving support as they engage in core activities. Another woman, Anita, was so inspired by the study circle she attended in a nearby village that she asked the tutor to visit her own village. As she progressed through the sequence of courses, Anita assisted the tutor in working with a group of women and supporting them in carrying out core activities—which has led to the growth of a community in which the vast majority of adherents are women. Kiran, an enthusiastic young woman from Rajgir who has been trained as an animator of junior youth groups, began a group in a school. It proved popular but brought opposition. She addressed this challenge by approaching the principal and explaining the nature and the purpose of the programme, after which the school gave its unqualified support.

**Increasing the Number of Devotional Gatherings.** Devotional gatherings were identified early on as key to the growth of the Faith in the Bihar Sharif cluster, and so a campaign to multiply the number of this core activity was initiated with the aid of 50 friends who had completed Book 1. They received visits to help them understand the basic elements of devotional gatherings and encourage their participation in the campaign. Volunteer hosts and supporters were marshalled, and materials such as audio cassettes of Bahá'í devotionals were provided. As a result, the number of gatherings rose from 8 to more than 50. This rapid growth had several positive effects: the life of the Bahá'í community was enriched and seekers were exposed to the Sacred Verses; a systematic approach for working with seekers evolved, with many progressing from participation in devotional meetings to study circles, eventually declaring their faith; participation of women and children in Bahá'í activities increased; and the Message of Bahá'u'lláh was spread widely within the cluster. Throughout the cycles, devotional gatherings in Bihar Sharif have continued to evolve and expand. Organized in harmony with local culture, such gatherings feature floral decorations, music, and simple refreshments. They have inspired the friends, in many cases for the first time, to chant and memorize prayers and selections from the Bahá'í Writings. By the eighth cycle, there were 190 regular devotional meetings being held, with 1,520 participants.

### **Building Capacity in the Next Generation**

The capacity of the cluster agencies in Bihar Sharif to administer the affairs of large numbers is perhaps demonstrated best through the programmes for the spiritual and moral education of children and junior youth, which together now encompass some 1,600 participants, with about 900 children in 65 classes





and nearly 700 junior youth in 55 groups. While the friends in the cluster had some experience in conducting children's classes, the junior youth programme was entirely new.

The conditions of this geographic region create a receptive environment for the spiritual nourishment the Bahá'ís are offering. Bihar is an economically depressed state, with more than 50 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, and the illiteracy rate is one of the highest in the country, at 60 per cent. Village schools typically have two or three teachers for 200–300 students in all eight grades, and students who wish to continue their education beyond that level must travel elsewhere. The majority of the inhabitants are Hindu, although 15 per cent of the population is Muslim, living in tightly concentrated areas, and the strong influence of caste and religious prejudice often leads to social tension and violence. Women are particularly disadvantaged. For example, there are no female teachers in the schools. There are also issues of safety at stake. With all of these difficulties, it is no surprise that outmigration is common.

In this milieu, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme offers, to growing numbers of participants, a unique framework of hope, in which they can develop their powers of expression and thought, along with a moral structure for their lives. And as they engage in this process, they are becoming highly motivated, thus ensuring the future health and vitality of the Bahá'í community and augmenting their capacity to transform the wider society in which they live.

The expressions of hope and change here are simple and concrete but profound in their ramifications. First, groups are not separated by caste, religion, or economic status. Second, the Bahá'í institutions have encouraged men to send their daughters to junior youth groups and study circles, which has not only benefited young women in the area but has created the opportunity

for all family members to become active participants in community life. In some cases, it has also transformed the way in which parents regard their children. For example, when one family with four girls accepted the Faith, the parents became increasingly aware of the need to develop the capacity of their daughters, and as the story of Kiran illustrates, the programme has been instrumental in equipping young women with skills to serve as animators of junior youth groups. Indeed, programme participants of both sexes who have gone on to study the institute courses often become enthusiastic contributors to the development of core activities.

**Rajive and Shankar** Rajive was 13 years old when he joined the first junior youth group in his village of Hargawan in 2003. His confidence and clarity of expression increased to a remarkable degree throughout the three years of the programme, following which he moved on to study the sequence of Ruhi Institute courses. After completing Book 5, he formed his own junior youth group and quickly proved himself to be a very effective animator. Rajive’s spirit of devotion and service also inspired four of his friends to join the institute process, and they have now established two children’s classes and four study circles and are among the most enthusiastic, active participants in the process of growth in their village. Shankar is another youth who took part in the junior youth programme and went on to complete the sequence of institute courses. He started his own junior youth group, as well as a study circle, helping the participants to engage in the practices associated with each book before he accompanies them through the next course. His efforts have contributed to steady growth of the Faith in his village, which now has nine devotional meetings, four children’s classes, three junior youth groups, and two study circles.

The objective of sustaining such a large number of participants is pursued systematically, with the most capable animators raising capacity in others. Resourceful animators assist junior youth with their homework, reinforcing the sense of trust that has been established between them. Many junior youth group participants move naturally into study circles when the animators continue to work with them as tutors of the institute courses. Strengthening the service component of the programme for junior youth and integrating the arts into their endeavours are the current priorities of the coordinator for this activity. In Bihar Sharif, where the arts have not traditionally flourished, a drama for each story in *Walking the Straight Path* has now been developed, and a cultural group has promoted the programme through drama.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH
No. junior youth groups	22	31	44	48	48	53	53	55
No. participants	219	320	547	582	582	632	632	656

## Collaboration and Empowerment

The transformation and empowerment of a continually expanding circle of believers in the Bihar Sharif cluster is facilitated through plans that employ available resources and encourage intimate collaboration at all levels. The cluster agencies readily adapt their plans to incorporate contributions made by the friends at reflection meetings and frequently visit communities to evaluate and plan activities. They meet with Auxiliary Board members to share



up-to-date news, information, and statistics that will help them to integrate new believers into study circles and assist participants in the institute courses to carry out acts of service. The close collaboration among the institutions and agencies in Bihar Sharif has created an environment in which the believers are empowered to take initiative and act—a significant development in the social context of the cluster. The shackles of preconceived limitations fall away as all are called upon to arise and develop their capacities to serve. The potential of such action is seen through the stories of people such as Shravan, Sarita, Anita, Kiran, Rajive, and Shankar—and countless others who are receiving training and stepping into the arena of service. And as they are transformed individually, so, too, through their actions, is the society in which they live. Today, the Bahá'í community in Bihar Sharif has developed a sophisticated capacity to manage and sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and it stands as a beacon of hope for any soul who wishes to enter within the ever-widening circle of its radiating light.

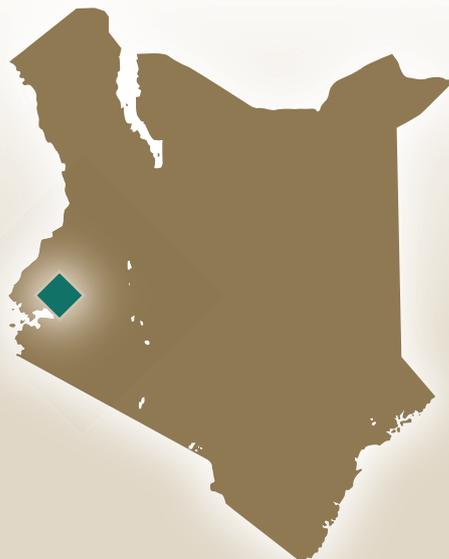


# Tiriki West

## *Kenya*

The seeds of the Faith were sown in the receptive soil of Tiriki West as early as 1959. Shortly after the first believers there embraced the Faith, intrepid pioneers and travelling teachers went on foot from village to village throughout the area, . . .

. . . inviting the local inhabitants to join them in the celebration of this new Day of God—and met with a very warm welcome. In those first teaching projects and campaigns, visiting friends would gather the believers to pray and deepen in the Writings, directing the joy and energy generated into door-to-door teaching by teams of four or five. Newly enrolled believers were invited to join an evening programme or attend a conference held at the end of the project or the campaign. Teaching the Faith has been a main area of focus for the Bahá'ís of Tiriki West ever since; another has been the promotion of education. The adult literacy classes and pre-schools that were established in Bahá'í Centres to serve the population of the area produced two major effects. First, the Bahá'í community's encouragement of education—particularly of the girl child—earned it a good reputation in the wider society, even though most of the early efforts were not sustained because of a lack of human resources. Second, the emphasis placed by Bahá'í schoolteachers and literacy facilitators on maintaining upright conduct and promoting sound family life, especially among men, attracted many women to the Cause. Today, this cluster has the highest proportion of women believers in the country.



### Cluster at a Glance

- Located in the Vihiga District of the Western Province of Kenya
- Population approximately 76,370; about 4 percent are Bahá'ís
- Largely rural area
- Inhabitants mainly from the Luhya tribe (90 percent), followed by the Kalenjin and Luo tribes
- Economy based on agriculture—mixed farming, livestock, and poultry on small plots of land
- Dominant religion Protestantism, with Muslim minority
- Bahá'í Faith first introduced in 1959; rapid expansion to over 5,000 believers by 1962
- Early focus on education
- First cluster to launch an intensive programme of growth in Kenya (January 2005)
- Forty-two Local Spiritual Assemblies

## Developing Human Resources

Throughout those decades, Tiriki West faced a challenge common to many other areas where large-scale expansion took place: While the local population was very receptive to the Bahá'í Teachings, consolidation became a major



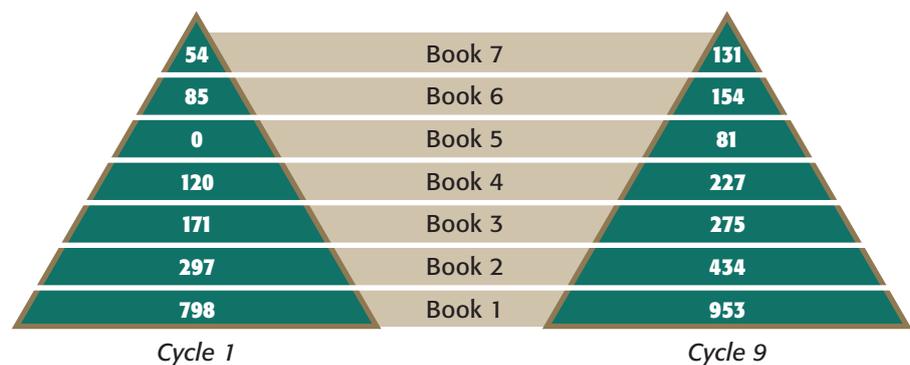
hurdle as the number of believers grew. Pioneers and travelling teachers could not satisfy the demand, and many people drifted away from the Faith. Clearly, dedicated and capable workers needed to be raised up from within the area, but how could this be done?

When the Universal House of Justice called for the development of human resources through training institutes in 1996, efforts were initially made to create a national course of study, but these efforts did not bring the desired results. In 1999, after consulting with the Counsellors, the National Spiritual Assembly of Kenya decided to adopt the Ruhi Institute materials.

Some three years later, six believers from Tiriki West attended an intensive session in Uganda to prepare them to act as tutors of these materials. They

returned home and conducted centralized courses throughout the area, while additional friends were eventually raised up to serve in this capacity through institute campaigns.

In January 2005, an intensive programme of growth was launched, and the development of human resources has progressed unabated through nine cycles. One of the greatest indicators of success has been the significant increase in participation in the higher courses, as shown in the table below. The desire to raise the number of tutors and junior youth animators, seen as key to sustaining and accelerating growth, was a strong force behind this increase.



Over the course of these cycles, the institute gradually decentralized training, and at this stage all courses are now offered through local study circles, as the table below indicates.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH	9TH
No. study circles	24	37	31	28	36	29	32	31	44
No. participants	147	202	182	94	125	125	192	153	163

As in other places, the practice element of the institute courses was overlooked initially, and efforts directed towards the wider community were lacking

in the cluster. Gradually, this shortcoming was amended, and soon seekers, friends, and relatives of Bahá'ís were invited to join study circles, as well as other core activities, making these activities effective instruments for sharing the Message.

**Gathering Together in Joy and Reverence** The inviting and engaging Holy Day observances in Tiriki West have had a great effect on the core activities—especially children's classes and junior youth groups. The commemorations clearly demonstrate the attractiveness of a vibrant community life to all who attend and have therefore become a potent teaching tool, at which seekers have expressed their desire to learn more about the Faith and have invited Bahá'ís to their homes, subsequently enrolling and/or joining core activities.

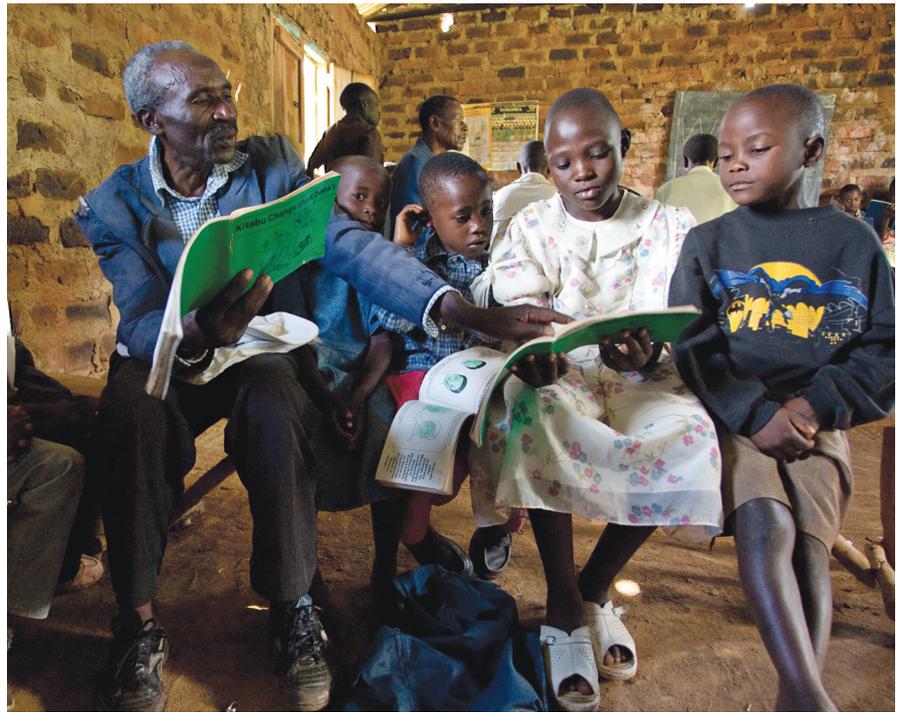
With their joyous and welcoming atmosphere, these day-long celebrations are a powerful magnet for people from all walks of life. Venues are beautified with flowers to proclaim to everyone the significance of the day, and friends from outlying areas of the cluster arrive singing praises to God, attracting large crowds as they approach. Each observance begins with stirring prayers and readings related to the occasion and then moves on to uplifting and captivating artistic performances. People of all ages—men and women, youth, junior youth, and children—offer dances and dramatic pieces, recite from the Holy Writings, narrate stories about the Central Figures of the Faith, and sing original songs. And although the programme goes on for the whole day, sometimes even then there is not time for all of the participants who wish to contribute.

To provide an opportunity for the friends to express their faith artistically, an arts festival has been established in the cluster, at which all performances are based on Bahá'í Writings, and some of these are then presented at the Holy Day observances. Organized by the cluster agencies, the festival is held on a rotational basis throughout the cluster to give different communities a chance to host.

## Learning about Teaching through Cycles of Activity

During 2003–2004, Tiriki West underwent pre-launch preparations for the intensive programme of growth that would soon commence. The Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies met to analyse the stage of development of the cluster and to identify available human resources. Activities were then initiated to establish a rhythm that would help the institutions and believers to become systematic in the process of consultation, action, and reflection, so crucial if they were to adopt the posture of learning needed. Teaching teams were formed, intensive consultations were held to prepare for the first cycle, and a core group of believers was put in place. The initial plan was presented at a reflection meeting, which was attended by well over 300 friends, prompting the cluster agencies to create three zones so that specific details could be elaborated by those residing in each one. The first cycle was launched in January 2005, and the careful preparations bore fruit. Collaboration between the institutions and agencies in the cluster was close, and there was a high degree of ownership of the growth process, which no doubt helped to bring about the 151 enrolments.

Nine cycles of activity in the cluster have resulted in an average of 56 enrolments of youth and adults, as shown in the table below. On average 17 new friends have entered the institute programme each cycle, while eight have completed the current sequence of courses. Wherever possible, new believers



not participating in study circles have been integrated into other core activities. Throughout these cycles, much has been learned about the nature of teaching. Challenges have included a lack of intensity during expansion phases; the scheduling of expansion phases at the same time as traditional festivals, which proved to be great distractions from teaching activities; and the outmigration of human resources to urban areas in search of employment. Lessons have also been learned about direct teaching methods. Notably, an emphasis on the use of “Anna’s presentation” in Book 6 during the most recent cycles has improved the effectiveness of teaching efforts.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH	9TH
Number of teams	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	30	24
Teachers mobilized	155	120	195	175	210	230	150	150	120
Campaign enrolments	124	66	22	65	21	25	29	54	38
Total enrolments*	151	66	22	76	21	25	29	54	61

\* These figures only account for adults and youth; children and junior youth of new Bahá’í families participating in core activities are not included.

## Learning about Teaching Teams

During the initial cycles, three- to five-member teaching teams were formed in reflection meetings, each led by a friend who had experience in serving as a tutor and who could convene team meetings to devise systematic teaching plans. Some teams were assigned to visit and teach seekers participating in core activities as well as parents of children and junior youth involved in classes and groups, all of whom had been identified by the cluster agencies. Other teams taught door to door in selected villages; yet others visited schools and dispensaries. The week before the two-week expansion phase, devotional meetings and Book 2 and 6 refresher courses were held to inspire the friends. Then, during the expansion phase, the teams visited their assigned villages on their own schedules. No specific goals were set.

As a result of these early experiences with the teaching teams, a number of valuable lessons emerged, leading to certain changes in approach. Among the most important lessons were the following: 1) the continuity of the teams is important if connections with the seekers and the newly enrolled believers are to be maintained; 2) team members should live close to one another and should include those trained to serve as tutors, children's class teachers, and junior youth animators who can start different activities during the consolidation phase; 3) teaching teams are more effective when they set specific goals before each phase; and, finally, 4) although refresher courses can help to prepare the teaching teams, they need to be accompanied and assisted to overcome obstacles encountered during the cycle. Further, as the end of the cycle is too late to make adjustments, the Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies have begun to schedule midpoint meetings with the team leaders during the expansion and consolidation phases to accommodate the learning taking place.

## Children and Junior Youth

Providing spiritual education to Bahá'í children has long been a strength of the Kenyan community and has laid a solid foundation for current progress. When Tiriki West's programme of growth was launched, there were 171 trained teachers and 93 classes with 557 children. By the end of the ninth cycle, there were 131 children's classes with almost 1,000 participants.

Throughout the cycles of the growth programme, understanding and practice have advanced on three main points: *inclusiveness*, *regularity*, and *continuity*. Now the Bahá'í community reaches out confidently to the wider society and offers classes to children from all backgrounds in the villages scattered across the cluster. The institute process has given rise to a cluster-wide network of trained teachers who approach this service more systematically than ever before,



which has affected the regularity of classes. And the institutions and agencies operating in the cluster have learned that the progression of participants from children's classes to junior youth groups to the study of the main sequence of courses is smoother when their teacher accompanies them from year to year. This was evidenced in March 2007 by the graduation of 100 children into the junior youth programme and 40 junior youth into the sequence of courses after having been accompanied in this way. Seventeen of these junior youth have already enrolled in the Faith, while home visits are being made to follow up with the others.

As the demand for children's classes has grown, a scheme for accompanying the teachers at all levels to increase their capacity and to mobilize them has steadily evolved. The cluster agencies also try to ensure that enough teachers rise up in each cycle to meet the need for more classes. Junior youth are now encouraged to work closely with children's classes while proceeding through their own programme, in the expectation that they will eventually become children's class teachers.

**Parents' Awareness Workshops** Since experience has shown that the involvement of parents in their children's education is essential if classes are to be sustained, the cluster coordinator for the classes organizes parents' awareness workshops to familiarize them with the curriculum and appeal for their assistance by creating a learning environment at home. Home visits are used to discuss their children's character and behaviour, and parents are invited to presentations made by the children. Similar workshops are also conducted for parents of junior youth in the cluster, who are invited to a central venue where the junior youth make presentations based on what they have learned in the groups, showing how such learning can help them make concrete decisions in life. Passages from letters written by the Universal House of Justice, or on its behalf, relevant to children and junior youth are shared, and questions answered.





The designation of junior youth groups as the fourth core activity in December 2005 focused greater attention on those in this age range, and the number of animators of junior youth groups in Tiriki West has jumped from 5 to 81. The number of groups and participants, most of whom are from families that are not Bahá'ís, has also increased dramatically, as seen below. Many have been attracted by the acts of service performed by their peers in groups.

CYCLE	1ST	2ND	3RD	4TH	5TH	6TH	7TH	8TH	9TH
No. junior youth groups	4	6	9	16	20	22	34	49	53
No. participants	34	57	109	208	232	272	418	613	631





The current coordinators of children's classes and junior youth groups grew up attending Bahá'í classes and participating in junior youth groups and study circles. When the present junior youth coordinator was appointed, other youth were raised up to conduct his children's class and assist with his two well-established junior youth groups when he is away from his community visiting other animators. The availability of such capable replacements is an indication of the extent of human resource development among the youth in the cluster.

**Youth in the Vanguard** Wycliffe, Patrick, Vahid, Godfrey, and Linhanda are just a few of the outstanding youth in the Tiriki West cluster. Raised in Bahá'í families, they have gone through children's classes, junior youth groups, and the main sequence of courses, becoming animators, tutors of study circles, and tutors for a Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development programme called Preparation for Social Action (PSA). They have offered service as travelling teachers to other clusters in Kenya in the early stages of development, assisting new believers to study the institute courses over a weekend. On the recommendation of institutions of the Faith, they will soon serve for two years as homefront pioneers with the goal of opening up certain clusters.

As in the case of tutors of study circles, the migration of animators to urban centres in search of employment has affected the sustainability of junior youth groups in Tiriki West. In response to this situation, additional animators are being trained so that they will be able to step in whenever they are needed. Some Book 7 participants are being encouraged to enter this field of service as well.

## **Reflecting Back, Looking Ahead**

Today Tiriki West is harvesting the fruits of learning about teaching the Cause and educating children, the seeds of which were sown so many decades ago. Since 2005, the number of Bahá'ís known to the institutions in the cluster has grown from 1,955 to 3,056, and the steady expansion of children's classes and junior youth groups, in particular, holds the promise of future victories.

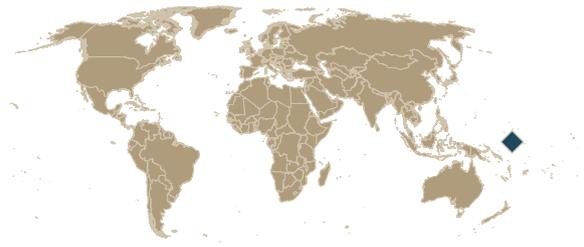
Key to the cluster's progress is the unity of thought and strong collaboration at all levels among the institutions, the agencies, and the friends. Flexibility has also been crucial, as experience has taught lessons about managing growth, and the scheme of coordination and functioning of the cluster agencies has evolved organically with the multiplication of core activities.

The foundation for further progress in this cluster has been solidly laid through patient, consistent, and unified action, and the receptivity of the population will surely generate even higher levels of growth. In coming cycles, attempts will be made to intensify teaching through well-conceived, collective action that will enhance the community's capacity to embrace eager souls. The vibrancy of Tiriki West's spiritual health grows with each wave of enrolments, filling the friends with a deep spiritual joy and sense of purpose as they strive to contribute in ever-increasing measures to the well-being of the wider society.



# South Tarawa

## *Kiribati*



One Sunday afternoon in Eita village in the South Tarawa cluster of Kiribati, a group of youth gathered for a devotional meeting at a Bahá'í home in the family compound's maneaba, a simple traditional structure with a thatched roof supported on posts with no walls.

As the youth began to sing Bahá'í prayers and readings, the beautiful music wafted to the neighbours on the warm Pacific breeze. Moved by the beauty of the words and melodies, they were drawn like moths to a flame, and the devotional gathering was transformed into a teaching opportunity.

The I-Kiribati people have been receptive to the Bahá'í Teachings ever since the Faith was first introduced to these islands by Knights of Bahá'u'lláh Roy Fernie and Elena Marsella in 1954. Various teaching campaigns over the years brought sizeable numbers of enrolments, but challenges always arose with deepening and capacity building. In the past, veteran teachers who knew the Bible well would visit the villages, bringing the glad tidings of the return of Christ and the fulfilment of prophecy. However, they were often not able to revisit and nurture the many souls who had embraced the Cause, and most of the new believers gradually returned to their churches to worship. As the years passed, many approaches to teaching were tried. In the mid-1990s, believers in the villages were encouraged to arise and teach using methods in harmony with I-Kiribati culture and traditional performing arts. But still the problem remained: How could the believers be deepened in their newly acquired faith? How could the capacity to carry out the needed deepening be developed in the local friends?

### Cluster at a Glance

- Located on the southern arm of Tarawa, one of 33 atolls forming the nation of Kiribati in the South Pacific Ocean, about halfway between Hawaii and Australia
- Official language: English  
Local language: I-Kiribati (formerly Gilbertese)
- Population 40,000–45,000 (about half of the total population of Kiribati)
- Main villages are Ambo, Bairiki, Betio, Bikenibeu West, and Bonriki, all located along a 29-kilometre strip of road
- Centre for government and main focus of trade and commerce in Kiribati
- Bahá'í population 1,343
- Bahá'í Faith is the fourth largest religious community, after Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon
- Intensive programme of growth launched in January 2005

## Developing Human Resources

The answer to the all-important question of human resource development arrived with the institute process. Kiribati's national institute, established in 1996 and named after Knight of Bahá'u'lláh Elena Marsella, initially offered intensive courses using its own materials, adding the Ruhi Institute curriculum in 1999. The following year, seven Bahá'ís from Kiribati, including three from South Tarawa, travelled to Australia for a one-week session to study Book 1 in English. A few months later, a knowledgeable and experienced individual from the Philippines came to Kiribati to conduct a second session, providing South Tarawa with its first contingent of believers able to facilitate the study of Book 1, and the institute began to focus solely on the Ruhi Institute courses.

It was clear that translation of the books into the I-Kiribati language was crucial if large numbers of the friends were to proceed through the sequence of courses. While the translation process had the disadvantage of slowing down efforts to increase human resources, the institutions knew that it would eventually bring a much greater advantage: it would make the institute process accessible to the majority of the people of Kiribati and foster a sense of ownership at the grass-roots level of the community.

With this in mind, the institute in Kiribati vigorously began the translation work. By May 2001, Books 1 and 2 were translated; study circles were immediately formed. The translation of Book 3, completed in December 2001, was eagerly awaited by those who wanted to serve as children's class teachers. Book 4 was available the following year, Book 6 at Riqv́n 2003, and Book 7 the next December. Study circles began promptly as each book was translated, reviewed, and printed. Throughout this effort, the pool of human resources steadily grew, augmented by widespread study of guidance from the Universal House of Justice. With the translation of all the available books completed, the institute was ready to raise up South Tarawa's first cohort of tutors, which it did through a series of intensive campaigns. By Riqv́n 2004, 48 people had completed the study of Book 7. As the level of activity increased, the institute's national coordinator began to serve full time, while continuing as the coordinator for the South Tarawa cluster, where human resources were developing



rapidly. By January 2005, when the first cycle of the intensive programme of growth was launched in the cluster, 74 people had completed the sequence of courses up to Book 7, and the number of friends capable of acting as tutors has continued to rise over time.



## Youth Spearheading the Teaching Work

The vitality and creativity of the youth have been key to the advances made in the South Tarawa cluster, and more and more of these vibrant souls have moved to the forefront of the teaching work as the intensive programme of growth has progressed. By the sixth cycle, many newly enrolled young people who had studied the sequence of courses in institute campaigns were spearheading Bahá'í activity. With guidance and encouragement, youth have become adept teachers who are creative in inviting people to core activities.

An institute campaign launched in August 2006 to assist a group of youth in studying the seven courses of the institute sequence was instrumental in galvanizing them. Dignitaries and special guests attended the completion ceremony, at which one town council member lauded the efforts of the Bahá'ís in promoting moral and spiritual leadership. He called the programme “the medicine for the social sickness that is affecting the youth” and encouraged the Bahá'ís to approach the council for any help they might need. Such recognition from government officials, seen as an endorsement of the institute's vigorous approach to making its programmes available to the wider community, greatly bolstered the believers.



**Youth Testimonials** At a reflection meeting in South Tarawa, a number of youth arose to speak about their experiences in the teaching field as a way of encouraging adults who perhaps wished to teach the Faith but were hesitant to arise. This is what some of the youth had to say:

- "I only declared recently, and during my attendance at the youth conference in Betio during which we studied the various Ruhi books, it was like I got a new spirit and new strength. When I started to teach in houses, fear and aloneness disappeared."
- "I was afraid when I first ventured out onto the field of teaching, in spite of all my preparations, but when I remembered 'Abdu'l-Bahá's words, 'Do not look at thy weakness and impotence; nay, look at the power of thy Lord, which hath surrounded all regions,' my fear quickly evaporated and I arose to teach."
- "I am just a youth, and I didn't know what to say. I was afraid. As well, I had never done any teaching before, but when I arose to teach, I discovered strength and confidence, and I was able to talk to people."
- "I, too, was afraid, and mostly I would not talk to people, but after the training I could arise and start my teaching. Now I can speak."

The involvement of the youth in the teaching work has sparked enthusiasm among the older generations. Though many veteran believers were at first sceptical about the approach to teaching adopted by the young people, attitudes were transformed as more and more long-standing Bahá'ís studied the sequence of courses and stepped into the field of service. The story of the shipbuilders that follows is just one of many that have spurred the friends on.

**The Shipbuilders** Two Bahá'ís in South Tarawa were holding a fireside during the lunch break at the shipyard where they worked. They began in the same way that Bahá'ís have taught the Faith here for many years: by reading quotations from the Bible to explain the coming of Bahá'u'lláh. A large crowd of shipbuilders sat listening, and although there were a few questions, the audience was mostly quiet until the biggest and roughest-looking shipbuilder of them all spoke up. "We have heard all about the Bible before," he said. What they really wanted to know about was Bahá'u'lláh. Who was He? The Bahá'ís looked a bit embarrassed and persisted with their Bible-based explanations. Again the man interrupted them and repeated that they wanted to hear about Bahá'u'lláh. At this point, a Bahá'í woman who had completed the seven institute courses came forward and



told the story of the dream of Bahá'u'lláh's father about the ocean and the fish. She also talked about the Ruhi Institute books and how people can learn more about the life of Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings by studying them. The shipbuilders sat and listened intently, and when she finished, the man who had spoken smiled and thanked her, saying that was exactly what he had wanted to hear. Now, could he please join one of these Ruhi books?



As illustrated by the shipbuilders' story, women have become especially audacious in their efforts to put the learning acquired from their study of the institute courses into practice, raising the tempo of teaching further. From the launch of the intensive programme of growth, the cluster agencies have focused on encouraging women to form teaching teams and visit homes in their neighbourhoods. The story of a team of women in Betio, highlighted here, speaks for itself.

**A Life Transformed** During the expansion phase of the second cycle, a team of women in Betio had set out to meet people and teach the Faith. During this endeavour they encountered a homeless man who was living in degraded circumstances. The women, who were not distracted by his dishevelled appearance, engaged him in conversation about the Bahá'í Teachings. As a result, he joined a study circle that was working through Book 1. Within four months, he enrolled as a Bahá'í, studied all the books in the sequence, and became an active teacher of the Faith. One day he appeared at the National Centre carrying only a pillowcase and a request for 30 copies of Book 1—one for each person to whom he had taught the Faith and invited to join the study circles he had established. The contributions of this man, completely transformed in manner and appearance, encouraged and inspired everyone at the reflection meeting that launched the next cycle.

## Reflection Meetings

One of the distinctive features of the South Tarawa cluster is the way in which the institutions and agencies there have learned to use reflection meetings as an effective tool for mobilizing teachers. Large, extended gatherings are a popular feature of village life in Kiribati, so reflection meetings have naturally become important occasions to create unity of vision, generate enthusiasm, focus attention on priorities, and make short-term plans of action. By the second cycle, refresher courses on Books 2 and 6, including both study and practice, were integrated into the reflection meetings—which were extended to two or three days, with entire families coming and staying for the duration. By the sixth cycle, the programme for the reflection gathering included a period set aside for teaching. The first evening was dedicated to celebration. The next day was devoted to review and analysis of the cycle ending, the presentation and discussion of goals for the coming cycle, and a workshop focusing on Book 6. On the third day, the friends formed small teams and visited homes in the village to practice their teaching skills, reconvening at the meeting house afterwards to share their experiences and make their own teaching plans. Invariably, new believers, many of whom enrolled after participating in study circles, contribute greatly to the consultations at reflection gatherings, testifying to the effectiveness of study circles in raising consciousness.

Keeping accurate statistics in a cluster with an extremely mobile population and many villages where communication is hindered by the lack of telephones and postal delivery has been a tremendous challenge. However, cellphones now allow for faster, more frequent, and more reliable communication among the cluster agencies and institutions, while the introduction of broadband and voice over Internet connections facilitate improved access to sources outside the country.

## **Involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies**

In Kiribati, the traditional culture places high value on obedience and respect for a recognized authority, and the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies was, from the outset, seen as crucial to the achievement of any goals in South Tarawa. Yet how could individual initiative be exercised in a community in which the believers looked to the Assemblies to approve every one of their actions? Individual believers were unsure of the scope of freedom available to them to take initiative, while Local Assemblies were uncertain of their role in the new dynamics emerging. It was eventually found that study circle participants remained active when their efforts were encouraged by a Local Spiritual Assembly and when there was good collaboration among the institutions and agencies functioning in the cluster. In villages where Local Assembly members were involved in the institute process and were gaining experience with core activities, Assemblies were able to assist in mobilizing participants into institute campaigns. To encourage such involvement and enhance collaboration, the National Spiritual Assembly arranged for one of its members, along with the national institute coordinator, to meet with all of the Local Assemblies in South Tarawa, which helped them to understand the role of the institute in an intensive programme of growth and to see how they could support its activities and work effectively with the institute coordinator and Auxiliary Board members and their assistants.

## **Junior Youth Groups**

Reaching junior youth with a programme for their moral and spiritual empowerment is without doubt the most dynamic process being systematically pursued in the South Tarawa cluster, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the programme, launched in 2004, has the potential to contribute to the empowerment of an entire generation in this tiny archipelago.

The first four junior youth groups were established in the villages by young people operating under the guidance of the Elena Marsella Institute. One animator reported, “Most of my group are from Christian households. Before starting my junior youth group I went to visit all the parents with my books and I explained to them what their children in the group would be taught. When they understood what I was teaching, they were happy for their children to attend my lessons.” Teams of women carried out the same kinds of visits in another village and met with similar success. Gradually, efforts to expand the programme extended to places where there were only a few Bahá’ís, none of whom had advanced through the sequence of institute courses or had been trained as animators of junior youth groups. As groups were established in these areas, a number of challenges arose: animators who had to travel from their own villages were not able to sustain the effort; with widespread interest in having the course material delivered in English, many animators felt their language skills were inadequate; and the size of the groups became difficult to manage, with as many as 40 junior youth turning up for some sessions.

While the first efforts in the villages were being made, three other groups were formed in junior secondary schools, which meet during periods allocated for religious instruction. Not long after, the Bahá’í community received a request from government officials to address growing concerns about the conduct of junior youth, and these groups were re-envisioned as a project of

social and economic development, falling under the aegis of the Otan Marawa Educational Institute (OMEI), a Bahá'í-inspired development organization.

As with the efforts in the villages, initial expansion of the number of groups in academic schools proved difficult to sustain. In response, OMEI decided to concentrate on one group in order to learn from experience. The following year, three groups were established and sustained at two schools.

**The Junior Youth Group in the Betio Junior Secondary School** In 2006, a small junior youth group was formed under the sponsorship of OMEI to study the materials of the spiritual empowerment programme in an academic school in South Tarawa. The programme was offered as a supplement to language studies that would address two pressing needs: to improve students' English language skills and to assist in their moral and spiritual development. With the principal's agreement, seven participants from the class with the lowest level of English literacy began meeting at the school on the weekends. By June, the students' reading skills had improved so dramatically that some were moved to a higher grade class—though they loved their junior youth group so much that they did not want to leave it. The programme also had a positive effect on the participants' behaviour; one young boy even commented that when he grows up he wants to be just like his animator.

The aid of a resource person from Australia proved vital in helping the friends respond to the many opportunities and challenges that were unfolding with junior youth in both the villages and schools. Through a combination of visits and email contact, she trained animators, helped to expand the number of junior youth groups, and assisted those working with the schools to gain a deeper understanding of both the principles of social and economic development and the conceptual basis of the junior youth programme. She also systematically developed the capacity of those serving at OMEI, so that within a year the organization was run entirely by local believers. She worked with the cluster agencies to address challenges in the context of coordination, with an emphasis on providing sustained support for animators in order to ensure continuity. They examined topics such as the preparation of animators using Book 5, the importance of holding regular “encounters” with animators and conducting refresher courses for them, and the need to visit junior youth groups periodically. The agencies learned what it means to accompany newly trained animators in their efforts to form and maintain junior youth groups, what kind of service projects the young people can undertake, and how to enhance the artistic component of the programme. Because the work

**Marebo Teem**, a youth who was born into a Bahá'í family, attended children's classes and as an older child enjoyed helping with the lessons for the younger ones. Encouraged by her parents, she participated in the institute campaigns organized for the youth and quickly progressed through the sequence of courses. Marebo was trained as an animator for junior youth groups in 2006 and, at the age of 16, was invited to assist the coordinator for this activity in South Tarawa in the villages of Bikenibeu and Causeway, visiting groups every two weeks, conducting animator encounters every two months, providing refresher courses as needed, and consulting with the other assistant coordinators.

with this age group was clearly beyond the capacity of the one coordinator appointed, a number of capable assistants were recruited, one of whom was Marebo Teem.

The efforts of the believers in Kiribati, with the support of the resource person, have borne fruit. The number of groups in the villages has consistently been 20 or more since the beginning of 2007, and although participation has fluctuated through the cycles of the intensive programme for growth, it has generally been greater than 250, drawn largely from the wider community. Further, by October 2007, there were 11 junior youth groups in local schools.

## Children's Classes

While the Riḍván 2000 message provided a strong stimulus for the education of Bahá'í children, regular children's classes were only established after a more systematic approach to child education was adopted following the translation of Book 3 in the I-Kiribati language. Neighbourhood children's classes began when the intensive programme of growth was launched, and by the end of the first cycle, the number of children's classes had grown from 12 to 19, with 285 participants. Collaboration between the cluster coordinators for children's classes and junior youth groups has greatly facilitated the multiplication of these activities, as the coordinators visit the homes of seekers together to explain the material available for both age groups. Parents are invited to enrol their children in the programmes, and trained animators and children's class teachers are assigned to work with the young people. The potential for the expansion of children's classes is immense. In October 2007, the number had grown to 27, with 330 children participating, and in January 2008, the people of Buota village approached the Bahá'ís asking for someone to come and teach classes to their children.



## The Way Forward

Bahá'u'lláh wrote: “Should they attempt to conceal His light on the continent, He will assuredly rear His head in the midmost heart of the ocean and, raising His voice, proclaim: ‘I am the lifegiver of the world!’”<sup>1</sup> The vision of the growth of the Bahá'í community of Kiribati, the first nation to see the sunrise at the dawn of the new millennium, has been greatly inspired by these words. In the South Tarawa cluster, some 30 souls are now entering into the embrace of their Beloved with each cycle, 40 per cent of whom generally go on to study the institute courses. Further challenges and opportunities surely lie ahead. And yet with every step that the friends in South Tarawa take along the path of growth, with every opportunity they seize and every challenge they meet, they move closer to the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's prophetic statement.



1 *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2004 printing), p. 108.

# Acceleration of Learning

The case studies presented in this volume describe the journey that has taken the friends in five clusters along a path of learning and progress until, in each, an intensive programme of growth has been well established. In all five, the elements of the framework for action resulted in a vigorous pattern of growth only after years of effort. Yet, a most promising feature of the second year of the current Five Year Plan has been the way in which the transfer of lessons and insights from such clusters has accelerated the movement of others through successive stages of development. When these lessons pertained to the spiritually charged act of presenting Bahá'u'lláh's Message "in a manner both forthcoming and inviting"<sup>1</sup>, the rise in the rate of expansion has often been dramatic.

Much of the acceleration witnessed can be traced back to the creative impulse which the Riḍván 2007 message of the Universal House of Justice imparted to the Bahá'í world. The message reminded the believers that with so firm a foundation in place after 12 years of consecrated exertion, teaching was to be the foremost thought in all our minds. The expression of longing by the House of Justice to see teaching become "the dominating passion in the life of every believer"<sup>2</sup>, a state of enkindlement expressed in "unremitting action"<sup>3</sup>, evoked from the believers a spirited response that has proven to be as dynamic as it has been systematic.

In the Riḍván message, the House of Justice makes reference to the operation of clusters "in a robust state of growth"<sup>4</sup>, indicating that in such areas the means had been found for carrying forward the work of expansion and consolidation hand in hand. In the months that followed, a number of simple strategies were adopted to accelerate the propagation of learning from these stronger clusters to as many others as possible. And as these strategies were implemented in diverse places, it became increasingly clear that the process of entry by troops was advancing at a new pace.

## Individuals as Channels for the Propagation of Learning

Following the release of the Riḍván message, the surge in the believers' desire to enter the teaching field was readily apparent. Equally evident, however, was the need in many instances for the friends to be accompanied in their efforts by individuals who could share the experience of their clusters in effective teaching campaigns, inspire confidence, generate enthusiasm, and demonstrate how to implement the methods and approaches examined in institute courses. In the early summer of 2007, the International Teaching Centre identified, with the help of the Counsellors, a few individuals with proven experience in their own clusters in applying the elements of the framework of the Five Year

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*. . . a number of simple strategies were adopted to accelerate the propagation of learning from these stronger clusters to as many others as possible.*

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*Although the exchange of practical aspects of learning and the concomitant rise in capacity among the local believers have been vital . . . their travels have exerted a deep spiritual influence . . .*

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Plan, particularly in the context of expansion. These friends were then asked to travel to certain clusters, in all of which conditions were propitious for an intensive programme of growth but, despite the efforts exerted, the level of enrolments remained low.

The Bangui cluster in the Central African Republic provides one of the earliest examples of what movement of this kind can achieve. A believer from the Lubumbashi cluster in the Democratic Republic of the Congo travelled to Bangui, where the rate of expansion did not match the clear potential for growth. The visitor collaborated closely with the Auxiliary Board members and cluster agencies, who had taken steps to prepare the ground for his arrival. Together they planned a teaching project for the outlying areas of the cluster, selecting populations on which to focus their efforts, consulting on the number of teams to be formed, and discussing teaching materials and setting goals. Because raising capacity among the local friends is integral to the work of individuals serving as such resource persons, the visitor accompanied the teaching teams in the field each day, paying particular attention to the functions of the team coordinators.

A total of 72 new souls embraced the Cause during the ninth cycle—12 times the average number of enrolments of the previous four cycles. Yet, perhaps more impressive still was the transfer of learning from Lubumbashi to Bangui about effective practical approaches to organizing the consolidation efforts, leading to the creation of a detailed schedule for how each believer newly enrolled was to be nurtured, especially through core activities. A remarkable 58 per cent of the new believers entered the institute process. In a subsequent visit by this same person to the cluster, there was a further climb in the number of enrolments, and the capacity and enthusiasm among the friends and agencies in Bangui rose higher still.

By the autumn of 2007, a number of similar initiatives on all continents had been undertaken with comparable results. Although the exchange of practical aspects of learning and the concomitant rise in capacity among the local believers have been vital, it is clear from the sense of enthusiasm generated and the reception given to the visiting teachers that their travels have exerted a deep spiritual influence, reminiscent of the words of Bahá'u'lláh: “The movement itself from place to place, when undertaken for the sake of God, hath always exerted, and can now exert, its influence in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Sites for the Dissemination of Learning**

Another strategy that emerged over the past year, closely related to the deployment of resource persons, involved the selection of strong clusters as sites for the dissemination of learning. The agencies working in such clusters, all in a robust state of growth, were assisted by the Counsellors in developing the capacity to receive a group of friends from other countries and expose them to the methods and approaches being successfully employed to sustain the accelerated expansion and consolidation of the Faith. A group of this kind may well include those who will draw on the experience to help further the development of their home clusters, as well as those who will be deployed as resource persons to assist other areas.

Recognizing the need for individuals who could act as resource persons, the Counsellors in the Americas identified 17 friends from seven countries in Central and South America with the potential to serve in this way. Given the

strength of the process of growth in the Norte del Cauca cluster, Colombia, these friends were invited there for a workshop which involved them in a combined process of study and action for one month. The workshop included study of guidance from the Universal House of Justice and certain concepts elaborated in the institute courses, practice in analysing available information to assess the state of a cluster's progress, and the formulation of plans on that basis, both for expansion and consolidation. Instruction and practice in direct teaching approaches and the organization of a teaching project drew on the content of Ruhi Institute Book 6. Participants also had an opportunity to visit study circles in action, participate in meetings of cluster agencies and the reflection gathering, and take part in the expansion phase of the cycle of activity and several days of the consolidation phase.

These friends then went as resource persons to some of the stronger clusters in different parts of Latin America. Results were immediate. The teaching work received impetus, and the capacity of the local friends to promote systematic expansion and consolidation was enhanced considerably. From August to October 2007, as some 30 clusters benefited from this transfer of learning, almost 1,700 new believers embraced the Cause, of whom 42 per cent were brought into the training institute process.

So effective was the approach that the International Teaching Centre encouraged the Counsellors in every continent to take steps to replicate the experience, and the development of learning sites in other parts of the globe is proving to be equally successful in lending impetus to the process of growth worldwide. In November 2007, for example, the cluster of Almaty in Kazakhstan was chosen as such a site for Asiatic Russia and several neighbouring countries; 25 friends participated in a specially designed programme of preparation, following which they were sent to selected clusters across the region. Working with an outline of how to establish an effective direct teaching campaign, they collaborated with cluster agencies, assisted in formulating systematic plans of action, and participated in their implementation shoulder to shoulder with the local believers. After only one month, nearly 420 souls had entered the Cause, an estimated 65 per cent of whom were immediately enrolled in the institute programme, many beginning their study of Book 1 while the expansion phase was still in progress. The approach had produced in that vast landmass of far-flung clusters with sparse Bahá'í populations a result that otherwise would have taken years to obtain.

Experience has demonstrated that sites for the dissemination of learning can be used effectively not only to transfer knowledge related to the movement of clusters in all its dimensions, but to further understanding of some specific aspect of the process. Work with junior youth is a case in point.

In the Portal da Glória cluster in Brazil, for example, the friends have managed to significantly multiply the number of junior youth groups over the past year, which currently boasts some 800 participants. The first 21 young people to complete the three-year programme for their moral and spiritual empowerment have all gone on to study the sequence of institute courses, and already five teach children's classes. Many of the current junior youth participants aspire to be animators of groups themselves. The insights gained by the friends in sustaining such large numbers in groups place the Portal da Glória cluster in the vanguard of the learning process, making it an ideal site for developing the capacities of individuals coordinating the work with junior youth from across the region. In February 2008, at the request of the Counsellors,

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in collaboration with the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, a seminar was held in Portal da Glória for those working with junior youth in Brazil, mostly cluster coordinators, during which they reviewed materials, reflected on their own experiences in assisting animators, and observed an “encounter” for a large number of animators. Visiting several junior youth groups in the company of the coordinator for this activity in Portal da Glória, they were able to see how animators are accompanied in practice in this cluster.

Today, well over 50 clusters have been identified that can function as sites for the dissemination of learning. About half of these will have a special focus on supporting efforts to expand the junior youth programme in the regions they serve. What will be essential is for the overall process of learning in all of these sites to be rigorously pursued and the capacity to host groups of visitors consistently built.

### **Homefront Pioneers as Agents of Learning**

The settlement of pioneers as a means for spreading the Cause is, of course, a feature of Bahá'í life that is well understood. What recent experience shows is that pioneers who operate effectively in the Plan's framework for action can lend focus, speed, and direction to the development of a cluster, particularly one in the early stages of growth, becoming in this way agents for the acceleration of learning.

Cambodia offers a notable example of what can be achieved. Experience in applying the framework for action is rich in that country, and its pool of human resources continues to swell as the number of those engaged in the study of institute courses grows. This has made it possible for several strong clusters to act as seedbeds from which homefront pioneers can be dispatched and receive ongoing systematic support.

Invariably such pioneers have acquired a heightened sense of service through participation in the institute process and have proven experience both in carrying out core activities and working in teaching teams. Most crucial, however, is their ability to strengthen capacity in others. After settling in an unopened cluster, they gather together a group of young individuals receptive to the Message and establish at least one core activity, commonly a study circle. As these young people deepen their understanding of the Faith in this way, they become increasingly active protagonists in the process of growth—protagonists who see the core activities as necessary components for building a community rich in its spiritual life and socially active in its orientation.

Once this initial cohort of new believers has studied the early books of the sequence—usually defined as Books 1 and 2—those who show the greatest interest are invited to attend centralized courses in a strong cluster nearby. There, they complete the study of Books 3 to 5 with believers of recognized experience, such as coordinators, and gain practice in teaching children's classes and conducting junior youth activities in the context of that cluster's dynamic teaching work.

Upon their return home, these relatively new believers can initiate and multiply children's classes and junior youth groups, fortifying the pattern of activity of their emerging community. Only weeks later, some again return to the established cluster, this time to study Books 6 and 7. Now they are equipped to significantly augment the strength of the training institute

process in their cluster, which can quickly reach the stage of self-sufficiency. Throughout the early stages, teams of travelling teachers sent from stronger clusters provide assistance to the pioneer in various aspects of the process of growth and reinforce local efforts.

Through this systematic and now well-proven approach, clusters in Cambodia not only can generate sufficient human resources for their own development but also have the capacity to establish a pattern of dynamic growth in neighbouring clusters within months. For example, in February 2006, a homefront pioneer family moved into the Pursat cluster where there were few believers at the time. By December 2007, the number of believers had grown to 610, many of whom were being nurtured in an impressive number of core activities: 31 study circles, 19 devotional meetings, 14 children's classes, and 12 junior youth groups. On the basis of this experience, the institutions in Cambodia have made plans to ensure that all remaining clusters in that country establish intensive programmes of growth by the end of the current Plan.

## Learning about Reaching Receptive Populations

The strategies described above have now been employed with considerable success in clusters around the world. As already noted, much of the learning that was propagated was about practical issues, for example, how to administer an intensive programme of growth, how to organize teaching teams in campaigns, and how to analyse data. But the most crucial lessons transferred were related to direct teaching, perhaps the area in which the most significant advances in learning were made worldwide this past year.

Reaching large numbers in regions where populations have traditionally shown a high degree of receptivity to the Faith has never been difficult. However, teaching on a wide scale in these regions had steadily declined over the years as it did not prove possible to meet the challenges associated with consolidation. The last few months have seen a reawakening of the spirit of direct teaching through collective campaigns in clusters with such receptive populations, but now as one of several elements integrated into a coherent programme of sustainable growth.

What was even more noteworthy, however, was that the same kind of forthright presentation of the Faith proved to be equally effective in areas where populations were thought to be less receptive, generally urban centres. The spark of teaching had already been reignited in such clusters as the believers learned to open core activities to family members, friends, co-workers, and associates. In recent months these believers have taken a significant next step, anticipated by the Universal House of Justice in its message of 27 December 2005. Emboldened by the receptivity they found in their immediate circles, and drawing on their experience in individual direct teaching, they carried out campaigns among receptive populations, typically those residing in a well-defined part of a city, such as a neighbourhood, a block of apartments, or a collection of dwellings.

For several years the friends in Toronto, Canada, were striving to understand the dynamics of teaching the Faith to receptive populations. In 2007, an effort was launched to build on the accumulated experience to date, especially in presenting the Message in a more direct manner than in the past. Eight neighbourhoods—principally apartment blocks with large immigrant communities—were selected because of the likely receptivity of their inhabitants.

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And at last the long-cherished goal of the friends in Toronto was realized. While there were several declarations as a result of this effort, the most striking outcome was that more than 500 new people started to attend core activities. Parents were particularly attracted to activities for the spiritual and moral education of their children and junior youth—a pressing concern resulting from cultural and social dislocation. Stirred by the passion for teaching among the populations they have begun to know, 15 believers, mostly youth and young adults, have moved into these neighbourhoods to nourish the capacities of seekers and new believers and to foster the growth of nascent communities, where already core activities are seen as a natural part of the collective life.

This approach to finding receptive souls is now being employed with significant results in settings as diverse as the teeming cities of India and the sprawling urban centres of the United States. Consider the state of Arizona. For a year the multiplication of classes in neighbourhoods in the Phoenix cluster had provided a sound spiritual education to a growing number of children whose parents were not Bahá'ís, especially among the Hispanic population. As a natural consequence, when an intensive programme of growth was launched in December 2007, the parents of such children were found to be especially receptive to the Message. The outreach to these parents and others incorporated learning about teaching in urban settings that had taken friends in other clusters months, even years, to acquire. The expansion phase employed direct teaching methods in collective action marked by intensity and high spirits. With the enrolment and registration of 70 individuals in 15 days, the expansion phase in Phoenix became the most effective one of its kind in North America, and the friends newly enrolled were integrated with ease into the pattern of community life that had been emerging gradually over the years as core activities were established. Only three weeks later, friends in the neighbouring cluster of Tucson launched their own teaching campaign, which incorporated lessons learned in Phoenix and took their existing programme of growth to a new level. But that is not all. Three weeks later still, the believers in the East Valley cluster launched their programme of growth, now with the advantage of the learning acquired by the other two. Selected friends from various regions of the United States came to participate and learn, and again the results were unprecedented. More than 100 souls embraced the Cause of God within nine days—and many more expressed interest in continuing to learn about the Faith. In fact, such was the receptivity and response that the cluster agencies had to end the expansion phase three days early to ensure that the consolidation efforts could keep pace with the expansion. The echoes from these three sister clusters in Arizona are already resounding throughout the United States.



The foregoing analysis demonstrates, yet again, the value of the learning mode in which the Bahá'í community increasingly operates. That in a matter of months the adoption of a few simple strategies has given rise to so remarkable an acceleration of learning is a testament to the heightened capacity of the community. The body of knowledge on which the friends can draw in promoting the growth of a cluster has expanded greatly with the insights gained into the dynamics of direct teaching during the second year of the Plan. In every cluster, irrespective of its current stage of development, the believers

can now think in terms of cycles of activity and establish a rhythm of growth that is distinguished by a recurring surge of expansion followed by a period of consolidation—a period during which the attention given to the institute process rapidly increases the human resources needed to raise the level of intensity. There can be little doubt, then, that the goal of establishing at least 1,500 intensive programmes of growth by the end of the Five Year Plan is well within reach.

- 1 Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.
- 2 Rīḍvān 2007 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990, 2006 printing), pp. 126–127.

