

**Devotional Gathering Newsletter
Washington, DC Cluster
September 2014**



Washington, D.C. Devotional Gatherings

Since January of this year, regular devotional gatherings in Washington, D.C. have grown from seven to over twenty. This last cycle five new devotional spaces opened up, enhancing the devotional character of our community. Seeing devotional spaces large and small, in frequencies that vary from weekly to quarterly, some focused on youth serving together in small areas of one or another neighborhood, others on an expanding network of coworkers and friends across neighborhoods, is a welcome and exciting development. The varied nature of these spaces is something to embrace and celebrate. While each may be unique, each is centered on the Word of God, collective worship, and strengthening the devotional character of the community.

Vision Boards + Spiritual Gathering + Brunch-Cleveland Park



A Vision Board made by a participant at the Woodley Park gathering.

On August 9th, six women came together for brunch, devotions and a vision board project at the home of Cleveland Park Baha'i. A few of us had discussed creating a devotional that could provide a sense of community and support to a small group of female friends, who are for the most part professional women. The Cleveland Park neighborhood already has a family-focused devotional gathering, so we aimed to create a space that would focus on another demographic.

The hostesses provided poster board, scissors, glue and magazines so the group could cut out images that symbolized their life goals. There was even a laptop and printer available so participants could print images that illustrated their dreams. While the ladies ate a delicious brunch, they took turns talking about career, relationship, service, health and travel goals. Then the group shared prayers, quotes and poetry before getting to work selecting and placing goal-oriented images on poster board.



Participants create Vision Boards as part of a devotional gathering.

It was such an enjoyable experience that, although the event began at 10:30 a.m., some stayed until 5 p.m. Those who attended were eager for another similar gathering, which they hope will happen on a monthly basis and continue including inspirational activities. The next event is planned for September and will feature a film and devotions about the various forms of love.

Georgetown Devotional

For the last few years, the Georgetown neighborhood has had an ongoing devotional hosted by a young interfaith couple. Hosting the devotional has been a very special opportunity to share a Baha'i activity in an interfaith home that is outward looking and aiming to build community in the hosts' apartment building and the Georgetown neighborhood. Preparing for the devotional provides an opportunity to not only deepen in the Faith but also has provided space and an opportunity to offer prayers for those close to us that have passed and to dedicate devotional gatherings to their memory.

It is not 'our' devotional - it very much belongs to our neighborhood and we feel most honored and happy to welcome guests. The Georgetown neighborhood truly supports this devotional through reflecting on improving and by helping with set-up and cleaning. And there is awesome teamwork from the neighborhood in inviting people to the devotional as well! We often reflect together that evening during clean-up. And through this process of reflection, we have made changes in our approach - such as not being quick to fill in silences in between readings and offering drinks at the beginning.

Everyone who attends is made to feel welcome and connected. Many Baha'is that come have naturally developed relationships among the regular participants who are friends of the Faith. We have had a wide range of people come from neighbors, former/current colleagues, friends from college and graduate school, and people from the neighborhood-even including people from a local gym. We are also fortunate to have a diverse range of ages and stages of life represented at our devotionals. What is exciting to see is how often participants of the devotional overlap with other

neighborhood events: Ruhi participants, Georgetown's Friday night firesides, and neighborhood deepenings.

The devotional gathering is interfaith and we draw from all religious writings. We have also incorporated poetry, writings from historians, and other secular writings. Participants are welcome (and some do) bring their own readings and, if they want, are even welcome to participate just through their presence. Almost everyone ends up sharing a reading. We always start with an introduction to what a devotional is and a few thoughts about the theme based on the research that went into the selection of readings. We also introduce ourselves and say why we came or a thought about the theme before and after the readings. Each one has a theme often suggested by a participant from previous gathering. We also aim to have a musical guest each time and we are so thankful for Baha'is from other neighborhoods that have been very supportive in this. **We would also welcome new musical guests, since those are sometimes hard to find.**

Navy Yard, S.E. Devotional

A Baha'i youth in Southeast D.C. expressed a desire to host a devotional gathering after the last Cluster Reflection Gathering held in July. The youth reached out to his family to make sure they would be open to hosting a devotional. The youth also reached out to



several of the SE Baha'is to help with planning the theme of the devotional, selecting some writings, bringing refreshments, as well as preparing and sending out invitations. After the first devotional where about ten gathered together to share prayers and after reflecting on the evening, it was decided to host a devotional once a month. The youth's family was so supportive and was happy to have people gather

together to share prayers. At the second devotional, the youth's grandmother expressed how happy it made her to hear the praise of God mentioned in the home.

Fox Hall Arts Devotional



Four youth – Baha’is and friends of the Faith – recently collaborated and brought several of their friends together to start an arts devotional. They had the first of what will hopefully be many lovely devotional gatherings. Their aim is to have a gathering every other week on GW’s campus.

Youth Devotional in Southeast

About six months ago, we reflected on the need to create a space for prayer for those involved in our neighborhood junior youth group along with their friends and siblings. The idea was to provide a space for these youth to get together, participate in a positive environment where there are devotions, and also have it be a safe space for them to socialize and play in a positive atmosphere. As a result, most of them have been coming by a couple of hours earlier to hang out and play games until its time for devotions. We have also learned that by including games either before or after those present become more comfortable with one another and we have developed closer bonds of friendship. The number of attendees ranges from 3 to 10 youth ages 11 - 17. Sometimes we even have a 6 year old who is the sister of one of the junior youth.

We usually pick a theme each week for the devotional and choose readings accordingly. The themes we have chosen have varied from Justice to Unity to Service. We also make sure to have a Bible, Quran and a multi-faith prayer book so the youth can feel free to read or share what they would like from different faiths. Typically, at least one or two of the youth will read some quotes from the Bible and a number will select prayers from the Baha’i Faith.

After reflecting on needing to make sure the devotional space remains reverent, we recently started to include a one minute period of meditation before we start the

devotional. We ask everyone to close their eyes and be completely silent for 60 seconds. It has been a great way to get the youth to calm their energy, to focus, and to prepare them for the more reverent atmosphere of devotions.

Devotions at The Crossings, Paw Paw, West Virginia

Note: A part-time member of the DC community, after attending the reflection gathering on devotional meetings hosted by the DC Area Teaching Committee in January, started thinking about and planning for a devotional in a goal cluster in West Virginia. Below is her story.

A devotional gathering held in August was among the first initiatives in developing a systematic program of growth for the Hampshire, Mineral, and Grant County Cluster in West Virginia. This initiative was preceded by an extensive effort to track down all Baha'is who had resided in or near the Cluster, and inviting them to a planning meeting. In this 3 county Cluster there is one other resident Baha'i, as well as a couple who lives in the cluster for a few months a year. The other Hampshire County Baha'i holds an annual June picnic for neighbors where he also talks about the Bahá'í Faith. The total population for the 3-county Cluster is about 64,000 (about 20% youth). The Cluster is in a mountainous area where travel is by rural roads, with many homes (including ours) accessed by miles of gravel roads. Population at The Crossings on over 1000 acres, is about 30 households year round, with a total of about 100 houses, and 100 additional properties with no house.

The Devotions event was planned by the Hampshire County Baha'is; assisted by prayerful consultation with the Jefferson County, WV Baha'is. Residents at The Crossings, friends, and neighbors were invited for a potluck picnic dinner and opportunity for spiritual reflection based on the theme of natural beauty and light. Invitations focused on the quote: "Blessed is the spot where mention of God hath been made." Participants were invited to bring an inspirational quote, prayer, psalm, song, instrumental piece, or art work. Our invitation went to property owners at The Crossings through email, The Crossings Facebook page, and a poster at the community mailboxes. We are just beginning to get to know our neighbors at The Crossings, so this seemed like a way to lay the groundwork for future conversations; and establish a principle of positive conversation and thought.

On that beautiful afternoon, we enjoyed our picnic and getting to know new friends, and then took time for reflection. The event started with an explanation for the purpose behind sharing spiritual thoughts (focusing on spiritual reflection). Devotions started with the prayer *Blessed is the Spot*. We provided a selection of writings from the Baha'i Faith as well as poetry and writings from other religious traditions. The quotes were distributed in advance, on individual cards at each picnic table – for contemplation while eating. Two participants brought songs and one brought a poem.

A Friend sang a Baha'i prayer set to the music of Amazing Grace and also told a story accompanied by music from the Lakota Indian people -- drum and bells. Story telling, encouraging a personal reaction from a reader, and music seemed the most successful. We did get into a small discussion about the Emily Dickinson poems included in the group -- these affected many in the group. Two non-Baha'i participants volunteered to read something -- a lovely poem from one, and another chose an Emily Dickinson poem after one of the Baha'is had read a different one twice, saying how much they were affected by the wording. Facilitating an inspirational program was an interesting challenge, and I look forward to gaining experience.

Two couples from The Crossings participated in the event, along with 5 Baha'is and a seeker from Jefferson County, WV. Several residents (about 8 couples) wrote to me, however, regretting that they would miss the event and expressing interest in a future get together. Couples who came, stayed for the entire time, and expressed how much they enjoyed the event. It was a beautiful evening; a joy to have a picnic and a thoughtful get together in such a beautiful setting.

I'm glad I tried to do something. The mental process I went through to try to figure out how to approach people I hardly know, and what to say when we were finally gathered, was really helpful. I'm beginning to feel more like I know how to talk with this group in a way that relates to individual interests, and won't appear to be proselytizing, or to be using phrases familiar only to Bahai's. Also, seeing individual's reactions to my ideas of what to say gave good feedback. Here, people do not seem to be surprised when you talk about spiritual reflection, etc. But I still want to work more on how to talk about this in an "ordinary" way.

Quotation for Reflection

Praise be to God! That ye are gathered in one assembly like unto the stars of the Pleiades, are illumined with the light of the knowledge of God and through the outpouring of the cloud of the love of God, ye are the fresh flowers of the meadow and plain; ye are intimate and familiar with infinite unity and love. Therefore, this meeting is blessed. But if it is firmly established and become constant, it will bring forth great results and most weighty developments will be attained. Consequently, persevere ye in renewing your meetings and display utmost magnanimity in firmness and steadfastness. When the root of the tree of the garden is well established and its protection is safeguarded, it will bring forth luscious fruits. Likewise, when the regiment of an army and the individuals of a cohort are united and related with ease, untold triumphs will be acquired. But if they come together one day and disperse another day, no fruits will be produced. Therefore, as ye have prepared an army of heaven and become the host of life, ye must continue to hold meetings, have spiritual communications, be firm in resolution, steadfast in purpose and be constant and persevering so that ye may win celestial conquests. -`Abdu'l-Bahá