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**BREATHING IN BREATHING OUT:
BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT OUTREACH WORK**

Training Bahá'í Communities in SED - Canada

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BREATHING IN BREATHING OUT: BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OUTREACH WORK

Project Goals and Methodology

The Breathing In Breathing Out Project is a three-year pilot project sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada and spearheaded by a small team of facilitators/mentors. Its primary purpose is to initiate and support a process of growth (i.e. capacity development) of Bahá'í individuals, communities and institutions for engagement in social and economic development processes in the wider (non-Baha'i) world.

This process of growth is understood to involve two interrelated dimensions, which we have referred to as 1) breathing in, and 2) breathing out. "Breathing in" refers to the spiritualization, deepening, learning, team building, planning, experimenting and institutional development that must occur as we prepare ourselves for involvement with non-Baha'i partners. "Breathing out" refers to the actual outreach work through which Baha'is become engaged in processes and projects with non-Baha'i partners aimed at addressing critical human problems and uplifting the human condition.

The entire project is conceived as a means of advancing the process of entry by troops in several important ways. First, the project seeks to shift the orientation and focus of a significant core group of Baha'is and their local spiritual assembly in participating communities outward to the needs and conditions of a struggling humanity. Second, the project seeks to foster the development of constructive relationships between the Baha'i community (its members and its institutions) and like-minded segments of the wider community. Third, the project seeks to infuse the teachings and principles of the Faith into the wider world's efforts to address its most challenging issues and problems.

The Breathing In Breathing Out Project has been on-going for about eighteen months and has worked in three centers across Canada, one of which involves individuals from at least half a dozen assembly areas. Participants in these centres work together in

small (core) groups to build their own capacity for community social and economic development work. They also come together approximately every two months for a more formal learning session which allows these groups to learn from each other, to pool resources and to be exposed to new concepts and skills. Many groups maintain some type of on-going informal communication with each other through e-mail and telephone.

In all three centers, a sponsoring local spiritual assembly provides support to the Breathing In Breathing Out Project, and is regularly consulted about the Project's activities. In this way, the assembly has the opportunity to build its own capacity for facilitating social and economic development work and to reflect on the implications of this line of action for the progress of the Faith in its region.

The rest of this handout is intended to provide a little more information on the thinking behind the formation and maintenance of these small core groups as a primary strategy for building capacity around social and economic development in Canadian Baha'i communities.

The Development of Core Groups as a Capacity-Building Strategy

Whether in Baha'i communities or in the wider world, the development and nurturing of "core groups" is really one of the most effective long-term strategies known for fostering the transformation of human systems of any kind.

This document focuses on the use of core groups in Baha'i communities to build human capacity and to stimulate meaningful Baha'i action related to social and economic development in the wider world.

A core group is a small (three to fifteen person) group of people who mutually agree to work together for human betterment, and who meet regularly to build their own human capacity for the work that is required as well as to plan and carry out that work.

Four critical functions of core groups

Core groups serve as a vehicle for transformative action in at least four ways.

1. *As an incubator for building human capacity*, core groups provide a “holding environment” within which individuals can come together around a shared purpose and common values. Within the boundaries of safety and mutual support provided by that environment, members can work on their own healing; learn, experiment with, and rehearse new behaviors; develop new relationships; and plan as well as carry out actions intended to foster growth and change in the Baha’i community and in the wider world. Within Baha’i core groups, some of the mechanisms for capacity building include spiritualization, deepening, systematic study, service, partnerships with other groups (within and beyond the Baha’i community) and strategic action (intended to contribute to human betterment) followed by systematic reflection (i.e., evaluation).
2. *As support systems*, core groups provide an environment of safety and mutual aid within which members can give and receive encouragement, can develop the commitment and the capacity needed for a particular kind of service and can be supported through processes of healing and learning often associated with personal growth in an atmosphere animated with love and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Since the animating spirit of Baha’i core groups draws its life from the revelation itself, Baha’i core groups should be relatively safe environments for growth, in which the behaviour of its members and the emerging culture of the group increasingly reflects the principles and standards of the Faith.
3. *As a platform for launching actions* intended to bring change in the wider community, core groups form a ready-made implementation team that already has vision and a common commitment and can consciously undertake lines of action intended to contribute to positive growth and change in the community and in the wider world.
4. *As seed crystals of change* within the Baha’i community, core groups are something like a collective pioneering project (or “collective centre” to borrow a term from Abdu’l -Baha) within the heart of the community, creating the path of community growth by walking it. Rather than trying to convince others to adhere to certain

practices or to carry out certain lines of action, the core group (in consultation with and in complete harmony with the intentions and purposes of the Spiritual Assembly) creates a microcosm of the larger pattern of community life they intend to promote. In this way, they bring change through the twin powers of example and attraction.

Core Group Life

We have identified seven distinct aspects or “moments” in the life of healthy Baha’i core groups. These distinct processes may be compared to the functions of any healthy organism, such as the human body. Respiration, circulation, digestion, reproduction, cell growth, co-ordination as well as direction by the nervous system, and DNA cells - all of these are important and necessary dimensions of the life of the organism. A person cannot very well pick and choose some of these aspects and ignore others and expect to remain healthy for long. The seven vital functions of Baha’i core groups are as follows:

1. *Spiritualization* - connection with God through prayer and immersion in the Word of God. Three important aspects of the spiritualization process important for engagement with both Baha’is and non-Baha’is in social and economic development work are enkindlement, divine guidance and empowerment.
2. *Learning* - acquiring new knowledge, skills and attitudes in order to prepare group members for personal transformation, new dimensions of core group life and for service and work in the Baha’i community and in the world.
3. *Experimentation and practice* - experimenting with and rehearsing new patterns of human relations centered on the Creative Word of God, and new lines of transformative action intended to bring about learning and growth in others.
4. *Outreach* - building constructive relationships with individuals and groups outside the Baha’i community with the long range goal of forging sustainable partnerships dedicated to serving the common good.

5. *Planning and preparing for action* - making plans and preparations leading to constructive action aimed at improving community life or the human condition.
6. *Development action* - by development action, we mean actions specifically calculated to contribute to a fundamental shift in the underlying patterns of life of a group, organization, community or sector of society (i.e. a shift in software; the values, principles, processes, ways of thinking and ways of doing things) that will more closely reflect the pattern of life revealed by Baha'u'llah, and will thereby bring significant improvements in some aspect of the material and spiritual life of the beneficiaries of the action.
7. *Reflection on the actions taken* - evaluating development action and the processes of group life are fundamental to the continuous improvement of core group effectiveness. Systematic debriefing of events and processes carried out by the group in the light of the sacred writings (and other useful sources) utilizing the principles of Baha'i consultation will insure that a culture of learning and growth animates the life of the group.

The circle below shows all seven functions of “core groups”. They are displayed in a circle to show that they are all recurring moments in a continuous cycle. If Baha'i

core groups are to fulfill their four key functions related to social and economic development work (1) incubation, (2) experimentation and practice, (3) platform for launching transformative actions, and (4) spiritualization, then the group must flow organically through these functions giving group members an appropriate measure at appropriate times.



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