

Releasing the Potential of Youth

Participants of the 20 youth conference in Port Vila, Vanuatu.

As the friends in clusters across the globe laboured to achieve the goal of establishing programmes of growth in at least 5,000 clusters, youth, willing and eager to improve the material and spiritual conditions of their surroundings, played an increasingly significant role in this process. “From the panorama of the Bahá’í world engaged in earnest activity”, wrote the Universal House of Justice, “one phenomenon strikes us especially: the decisive contribution made by youth on every continent.”³¹

In February 2013, the House of Justice announced the convocation of 95 youth conferences to take place around the world that year. So overwhelming was the response of the Bahá’ís and their friends that three

months later the Supreme Body called for an additional 19 conferences to be held. These gatherings helped mobilize thousands upon thousands of youth into the field of service, providing an impetus to greater activity in many clusters. In preparation for the conferences, some 4,400 young people were brought together in orientation seminars to study the materials prepared for the conferences that would help them facilitate group discussions. The conferences demanded from the institutions of the Faith new levels of collaboration to welcome and support hundreds and at times thousands of young people on a path of service. The remarkable result of this wholehearted collective effort was that more than 80,000 youth participated in the conferences worldwide.

An Efflorescence of Youth Gatherings

In the wake of the youth conferences, the Bahá’í community was faced with a burgeoning number of young people receptive to the Message of Bahá’u’lláh and eager to serve their communities. To respond to this need, follow-up youth gatherings were held in countries, regions, clusters, neighbourhoods, and villages, and more friends were raised up to facilitate discussions about issues that affect the lives of youth.

Many young friends who were asked to serve as facilitators for the conferences later served as tutors or supported the institute process in other ways, channelling their enthusiasm into community-building activities. In **Panama**, the national institute board, with the help of five friends who were part of the team of facilitators at the conference in **San José, Costa Rica**, responded to the enthusiasm of those who attended the conference by organizing three tutor gatherings involving more than 50 tutors, a reflection gathering with 15 coordinators of children’s classes and junior youth groups, and institute campaigns focused on the first books of the sequence involving more than 80 youth of the wider community from 7 different clusters. An additional 22 youth were identified who could offer ongoing support to the unfolding activities. With the help of the institutions and agencies, they maintained close and regular contact with more than 250 young people across the country. As this team of youth gained more experience in accompanying others in the field of service, the institutions called on some to serve on the institute board or as coordinators.

In the year after the conferences, an additional 100,000 young people took part in numerous encounters to consult about ways in which they could contribute to

the betterment of society. Many youth joined institute courses and participated in community activities. A sizeable portion of them began to carry out acts of service, while others, more experienced with the institute process, accompanied and supported them. In some clusters, such youth gatherings at the cluster, neighbourhood, and village levels became a regular feature of the three-month cycles of activity. After attending subsequent gatherings, some 500 youth from 12 clusters in **Cambodia** returned to their homes to participate in numerous study circles and intensive institute courses.

The follow-up encounters strengthened the bonds of friendship among young people throughout an entire country and helped them develop a vision for service to their communities. In **Japan**, a group of about 30 young people from 5 clusters who attended the 2013 conference in **Macau** came together every three months, and communicated between meetings, to foster mutual support and a common vision for reaching out to their peers. The challenges posed by the climate and transportation infrastructure in **Greenland** made it difficult for young



Participants of a youth gathering in Afghanistan.

people scattered across the country to have a national youth gathering. Nonetheless, the friends were determined. They used creative means to invite and facilitate the participation of youth from many parts of the country by using online communication tools.

A review of youth participation in one geographic region illustrates the scope and complexity of the work under way: Throughout the **Indian Subcontinent**, the youth conferences in 2013 were attended by about 20,000 young people. During 2014 and 2015, a further 153 gatherings were organized with more than 12,000 participants in **India** alone. As a result of these and other gatherings in **Nepal** and **Sri Lanka**, the institutions estimated that an additional 25,000 youth have joined the conversation on how they can contribute to the development of their communities. Of course, not every part of the world experienced this scale of participation, but the accounts that follow show how holding such gatherings, in a wide variety of circumstances, generated a constructive discourse on the nature of spiritual and social transformation to which young people can actively contribute.



A gathering for youth in the Kharkhorin neighbourhood of Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Inviting Youth to Walk a Path of Service

As interactions and conversations with young people gained momentum and awareness of their role in building a new civilization increased, the youth were encouraged to take their first steps on a path of service. Communities, institutions, and agencies everywhere faced the challenge of strengthening their own capabilities and finding creative ways to accompany the youth and respond adequately to their enthusiastic expectations. Training institutes, in particular, intensified their efforts to learn how to help groups of young people enter the sequence of courses and arise to serve, a process which the Universal House of Justice referred to as “a sacred charge”³² of the institutes. The examples that follow highlight the focused efforts of training institutes in preparing newly found youth for active service.

- Communities in various settings tried to learn what constitutes an effective rhythm of study, considering both regular weekly gatherings and periods of intensive study. In the **Central Mahalapye** and **Greater Gaborone** clusters in **Botswana**, after having several meetings with newly met youth and gaining the support of their parents, the friends committed to quickly mobilize tutors who could hold both regular study sessions and occasional intensive institute campaigns.
- In the **Bellas Vistas** neighbourhood in **Madrid, Spain**, some youth who were studying Book 2 invited their friends each week, so naturally a Book 1 study circle was formed at the same time and place. Although the study circles met weekly, a level of intensity was maintained in the interim as participants met one another four or five times a week

for devotionals, firesides, and youth gatherings.

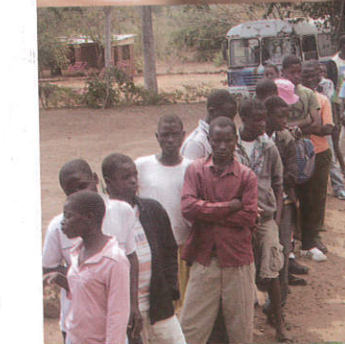
- The institute board in **Venezuela** strove to increase its pool of tutors so there would be adequate support for dozens of youth who were interested in studying institute courses and carrying out acts of service. Some 150 friends who had been identified as possible tutors attended a training programme, during which 51 of them pledged to facilitate a new study circle. Steps were taken to systematically accompany these tutors as they planned their first meeting, identified and visited the participants, and participated in periodic reflection meetings to help foster steady progress.
- Homefront pioneers in **Majuro, Marshall Islands**, met with a number of young people regularly—at first daily—to study messages from the House of Justice and themes from the sequence of institute courses. About 20 of these youth entered the institute process and, while studying Book 1, participated in a nine-day teaching campaign, during which 12 people enrolled in the Faith.

As the 20 youth continued their study of the books in the sequence, they reflected and planned regularly, and eventually 10 junior youth groups were formed and sustained in the neighbourhood.

- In the **Peñalolén** neighbourhood in **Santiago, Chile**, the area where the House of Worship is located, tutors held regular social gatherings in high schools and worked to develop a spirit of friendship and trust among the young people. Many of the youth studied Book 1 and after participating in the institute process were able to initiate 24 core activities.
- Shortly after a national youth gathering in **Italy**, a group of youth from the **Napoli-Portici** and **Caserta** clusters who had recently completed a study of Book 1 joined an intensive Book 5 training, during which three junior youth groups were formed. After this training, some of the youth embraced the Faith and, with the support of the friends in the community, started a weekly devotional gathering.



A junior youth group in Nigeria.



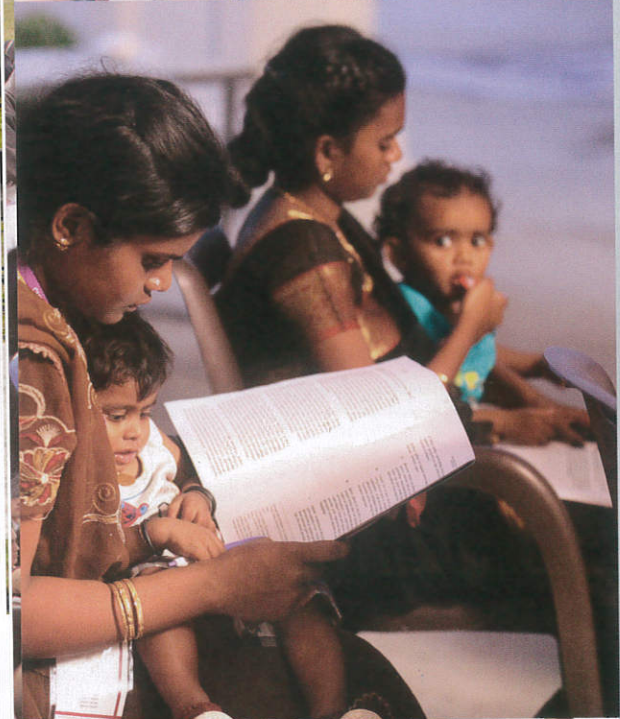
114 Youth Conferences

The convocation of the 114 youth conferences that took place over several months in 2013 marked a unique period in the Five Year Plan. Typified by an outpouring of energy and motivation among young people from all walks of life “to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity”,³³ the conferences unlocked a surge of creativity and commitment in large numbers of youth, who were “brought within the widening embrace of a conversation and pattern of action of far-reaching consequence regarding how to live a coherent life and be an agent of spiritual and social transformation”.³⁴ Conferences were held in 66 countries on 5 continents, with more than 80,000 participants, many of whom were from the wider community. Attendance at each conference ranged from about 200 to over 4,000, and all the conferences followed a similar format: brief plenary sessions, study of specially prepared materials in larger groups of 80 and smaller groups of 20, and evening arts presentations.

During this intensive period of the worldwide conferences, lessons learned on these occasions were distilled and shared with the Bahá’í community through accounts of each conference published on the Bahá’í World News Service and through a series of short films entitled *To Serve Humanity*, which captured the participants’ insights as they discussed themes central to the process of community building.

When the conferences concluded, participants took to heart the call of the House of Justice to “steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance”.³⁵ They set off to their communities with renewed energy, profound resolve, and keen vision, eager to face the tasks ahead and play their part. The enthusiasm of the youth from around the world was reflected in the words of one participant: “We are coming to the conference with the firm intention to act after it finishes. This conference is the first step on the path of service for many.”





"The most difficult thing when you talk about the idea of the betterment of the world is that people do not believe that it can happen. It helps when we explain that if we are united this hope can be realized."

Almaty, Kazakhstan

"This conference is a symbol of the oneness of humanity because it brings together people from different backgrounds, a rare thing in our polarized environment."

Nundu, Democratic Republic of the Congo

"At home, every day of my life I experience prejudice, but this is the first gathering where I have felt no prejudice at all."

Tirana, Albania

"To help someone, you have to overcome selfishness. We need unity. We need to wish for the welfare of the other person. Because everything we do has to be done with love."

Port-au-Prince, Haiti

"When I am back from the conference, I would like to continue what I have been learning with my friends about how to help younger youth refine their characters."

Antananarivo, Madagascar

"Listening to how much people want to make a change in the world has inspired me to do my part and start my journey towards serving younger youth in my neighbourhood."

Auckland, New Zealand



"I am anxious to go back to my community, since the process has not started there yet. I am eager to put in practice everything I've learned. I feel assured that I will receive the necessary support and encouragement."

Lima, Peru

"We are learning about principles that are helpful in our lives and about how to positively influence the younger ones in our community when we return."

Nairobi, Kenya

"The day-to-day activities we carry out are to assist others. For example, when we take care of our rivers, we are supporting others who rely on that ecosystem."

San José, Costa Rica

"I feel more confident now, because I see that I am not alone on this path. I see that there are many other young people like me, who have the same sense of purpose in life."

Istanbul, Turkey

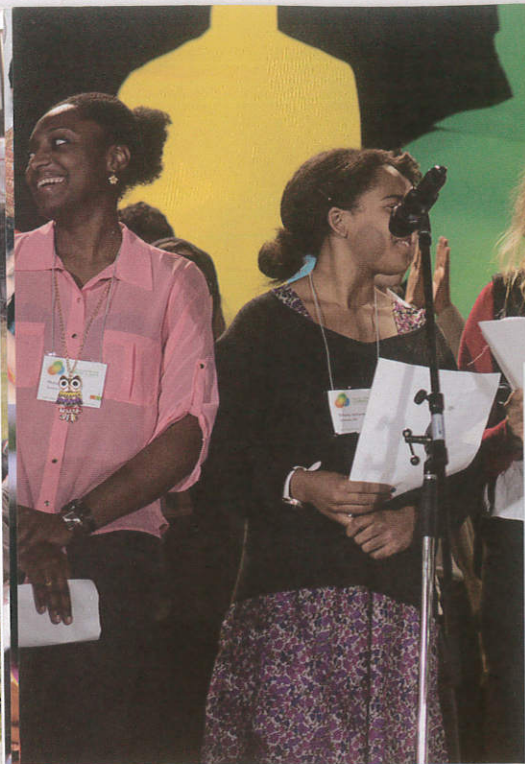
"We have powers, but when we come together the powers become immense. A drop can become an ocean."

Yaoundé, Cameroon

"I see that there are two kinds of education: material and spiritual. Without spiritual education, we may not think of the importance of serving others."

Daidanaw, Myanmar





"One might think that study and service are two separate things. But I do not study for myself; I study because I want to make a contribution to the betterment of the world."

Frankfurt, Germany

"All people are meant to bring the world to its noble destiny, which is to be united. I really want more people to be part of this conversation."

Seberang Perai (Sungai Siput), Malaysia

"When people think they have to be the same to be united, they are missing the point. We are all different, but we work together."

Macau, Macau

"At this conference, I have learned that no matter how small and young I am, I still have something to offer to the world."

Thyolo (Blantyre), Malawi

"We need to return and share our experiences with other youth, so that they too can be aware of the importance of this period and the need to walk on a path of service."

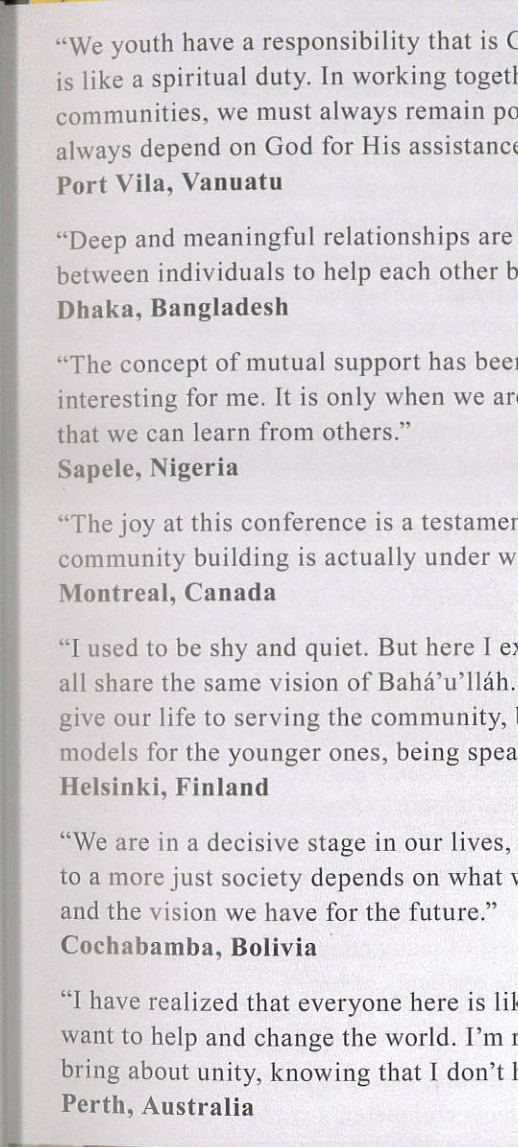
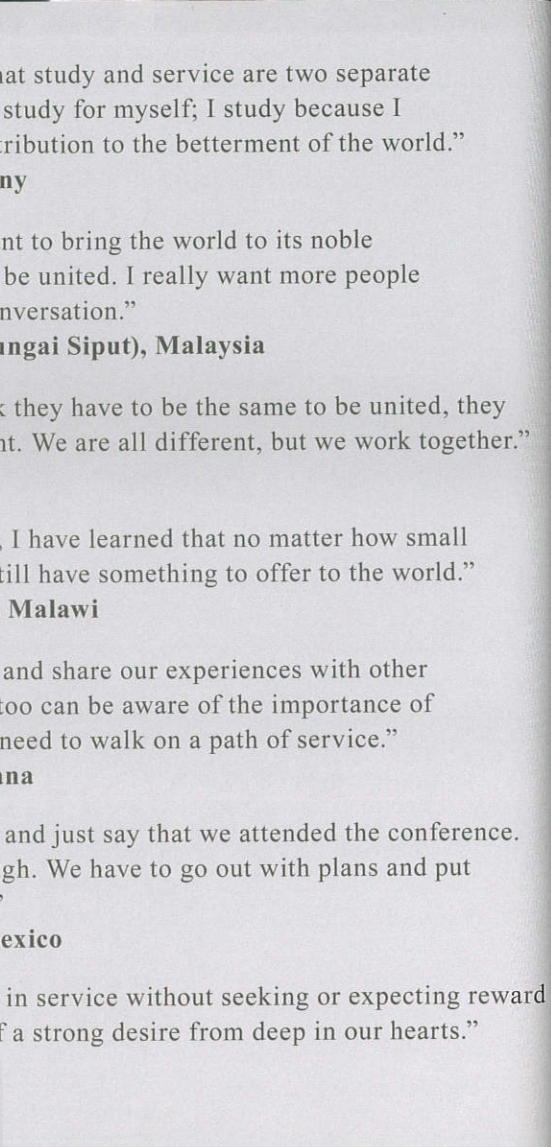
Georgetown, Guyana

"We can leave here and just say that we attended the conference. But that is not enough. We have to go out with plans and put them into practice."

Aguascalientes, Mexico

"We should engage in service without seeking or expecting reward in return, but out of a strong desire from deep in our hearts."

Biratnagar, Nepal



"We youth have a responsibility that is God-given; it is like a spiritual duty. In working together to serve our communities, we must always remain positive and always depend on God for His assistance."

Port Vila, Vanuatu

"Deep and meaningful relationships are necessary between individuals to help each other build a community."

Dhaka, Bangladesh

"The concept of mutual support has been especially interesting for me. It is only when we are humble that we can learn from others."

Sapele, Nigeria

"The joy at this conference is a testament ... that community building is actually under way."

Montreal, Canada

"I used to be shy and quiet. But here I experienced that we all share the same vision of Bahá'u'lláh. We have risen to give our life to serving the community, by being role models for the younger ones, being spearheads of learning."

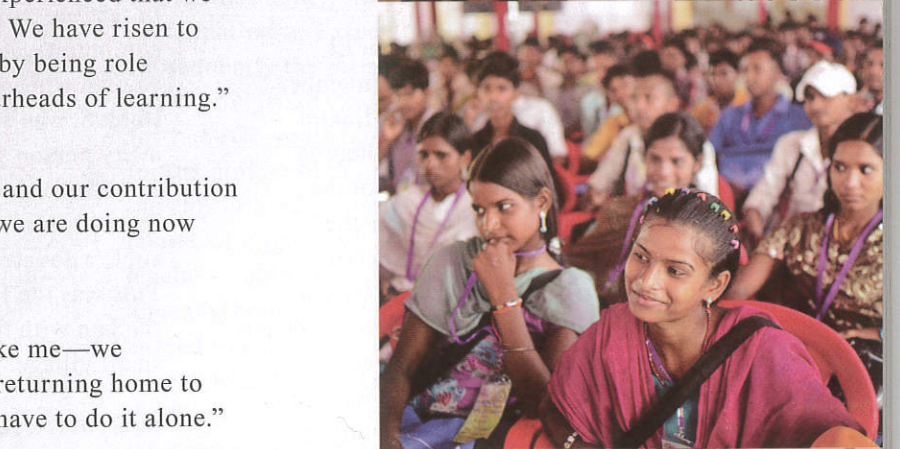
Helsinki, Finland

"We are in a decisive stage in our lives, and our contribution to a more just society depends on what we are doing now and the vision we have for the future."

Cochabamba, Bolivia

"I have realized that everyone here is like me—we want to help and change the world. I'm returning home to bring about unity, knowing that I don't have to do it alone."

Perth, Australia



- In **Taiwan**, a national animators' gathering was attended by 44 youth who were eager to serve. To help them advance on their path of service, regular intensive institute campaigns were organized during school holidays, enabling about 40 youth to serve at the forefront of the community-building process.
- In the **South Tarawa** cluster of **Kiribati**, the number of core activities grew from 80 to 118 over the course of one cycle, with more than half being facilitated by youth. After a few more cycles, during which several hundred more young people joined community-building activities, the number of core activities surpassed 200. The friends began to observe a change in the atmosphere of the reflection meetings. Children, who were used to playing outside during consultations, now actively began to contribute. Similarly, youth who had previously filled the back rows at meetings were given the opportunity to share their insights and experiences.
- In the **Occidente Sur** cluster in **El Salvador**, an Auxiliary Board member and the national institute coordinator were asked to focus on strengthening the participation and capacity of the local youth as a way to counter the increasing gang violence in the area. With the support of a Local Spiritual Assembly, a group of young friends began contributing to the growth process in the cluster, including working with some 200 youngsters participating in junior youth groups.
- The believers in **Utrecht, Netherlands**, dedicated expansion periods to engaging young people in conversation and inviting them to gatherings aimed at introducing the training institute. In the days after the initial encounter, plans were made with

each participant to begin an intensive study of the courses of the institute. They were accompanied almost daily for a few weeks as they carried out the practical elements of the courses. As these efforts unfolded, the cluster agencies realized that creating a culture of intensive training that combined study and practice was instrumental in generating a movement of youth committed to working for the transformation of society.

As more and more young people arose to participate in activities and carry out acts of service in their communities, especially as animators or children's class teachers, their transformation became increasingly apparent. Many are the accounts of young people who, after an intense period of study and service, reshaped their ideas about how they would like to lead their lives.

- In **Tajikistan**, four youth from the **Khujand** cluster attended a month-long institute campaign in the summer and then dedicated an additional month to serving full time in their home community. Among them was a young woman who, after completing a study of Book 6, was aflame with a desire to teach every person whose path she crossed. Upon her return home, she shared what she had learned about the Faith with her aunt, who later also became a Bahá'í. This was the first of many conversations she had with the residents of her small village.
- In **Gyumri, Armenia**, a group of university students completed a study of Book 1. One participant was moved to tears during the devotional part of the study circle, and later shared the following reflections on what she had gained:

The book gave me a lot of ideas;

now I must think better before doing something. I am impatiently waiting for the next book. After studying Book 1, I understood that there are many things I should improve in my behaviour, for example, to be more truthful. Before I thought it was okay to say little lies, but now I understand that it is not acceptable; I will work on this.

Inspired by the friendships nurtured during the youth conferences and in other spaces, groups of young people, living within close geographic proximity, were naturally drawn to supporting one another's efforts while treading a path of service together.

- In **Mongolia**, where 750 youth participated in the 2013 conference in **Ulaanbaatar**, about 42 groups of youth emerged who served together mostly at the level of neighbourhoods and villages.
- In different localities across the **Fiji Islands**, young facilitators gathered groups of youth to participate in one of three weekend youth gatherings. In the plans shared by each group, the youth expressed their commitment to expanding their circle of friends, involving their families, advancing in the educational process, and increasing the quality and number of core activities in their communities.

Influencing the Life of the Community

Reinforced by the encouragement and support of their communities and institutions, youth felt empowered to shoulder responsibilities that contributed to the advancement of neighbourhoods, villages, clusters, and regions in many corners of the world. "The infusion of



Youth in New Zealand plan activities for an expansion phase.

energy from a vibrant band of youth", the House of Justice asserted, "allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated."³⁶ Below are a few examples of how this has occurred.

- In **St. Thomas, Jamaica**, a youth who had studied Book 5 initiated conversations with other young people in the community. This led to 30 youth participating in 4 study circles and subsequently the formation of 6 junior youth groups. To expand the programme further, two youth and the coordinator for the junior youth programme in the cluster held consultations over the course of a year with the principal, teachers, and parents' association of a local school. Initially, the teachers agreed to come 15 minutes early twice a week to accommodate the junior youth programme. Over the course of a few months, the teachers who had initially objected to the programme gave animators extra time for the group's sessions and started participating themselves. Eventually, six junior youth groups were formed at the school with the participation of 75 students.

- In efforts to nurture the development of the **Mgambo** cluster in **Tanzania**, the regional agencies sent a visiting team to mobilize youth who could serve as animators and children's class teachers. Fourteen youth started Book 5 after the teaching team visited their parents to build a common vision and gain their support. Within one month, 10 junior youth groups were formed, and the cluster crossed the first milestone. As more young people began engaging in the cluster's educational activities, it became clear that establishing bonds with families was a critical factor in strengthening the participation of youth and opening the doors to a flourishing process of community building. In the **Shinyanga** cluster, 30 youth, of whom 10 formally joined the Faith, shouldered the responsibilities of community building by sustaining 16 children's classes with 160 participants, 23 junior youth groups with

252 participants, and 4 study circles with 26 participants.

- In the **Centre** cluster of **Belgium**, the cluster agencies applied lessons learned from working with young people to the progress of the entire cluster. The friends held meetings, modelled after the gatherings organized for youth, for the whole community to plan and mutually support one another in a campaign to multiply devotional meetings. Likewise, witnessing the effect of home visits on youth and their families, the friends organized home visits to believers. Such visits inspired more believers to support and participate in the community-building process. With the youth as a driving force, groups in different parts of the cluster started exploring the dynamics of growth in their own neighbourhoods. It became apparent that the efforts spearheaded by the youth had kindled a

spark in the life of the cluster as a whole, inspiring universal participation and even exerting an influence on the neighbouring clusters. As a result of these efforts, the number of devotional gatherings being sustained in the cluster grew from an average of 4 to 23 in less than a year. New children's classes were also formed, while existing ones grew in participation.

As the institutions in the **Democratic Republic of the Congo** reflected on how to accompany youth on their path of service, they noted some moving personal accounts. Below is the story of a youth who helped advance the community-building process in her village.

A twenty-year-old woman from a village in the **Murhula** cluster who had studied Book 1 attended the youth conference in **Bukavu** in August 2013. Galvanized by the enthusiasm and unity of other

youth, upon her return home she raised awareness among the youth in her village and formed a group of nine of her peers from the wider community to study the conference material. She also had conversations with some parents of children and junior youth in her village and realized that she needed a plan to build her own capacity to meet the needs of spiritual education in her home community. She walked over 20 kilometres to consult with the coordinator, who immediately put aside three days to go through Book 2 and parts of Book 3 with her, including the 24 lessons and the elements of a children's class. They then devoted a day to consulting on how to start a junior youth group and to studying *Breezes of Confirmation*. Accompanied by the coordinator, she initiated a children's class and a junior youth group. The leader of the village, the members of the Local Spiritual Assembly, and the nine young friends of this woman were invited to participate in a gathering to open these activities in the village. While she served as an animator and a children's class teacher, she continued her study of the sequence of courses.

In several regions, communities recognized that youth can serve not only on an equal footing with the older generation but also at the forefront of activities and influence social and cultural norms. In certain neighbourhoods and villages in the **Lusaka**, **Mwinilunga East**, and **Zambezi** clusters in **Zambia**, the friends observed that as the youth committed themselves to supporting the spiritual and social development of junior youth and children, the adult members of the community learned to appreciate their services and encouraged them more. The culture of consultation at various levels in the cluster evolved, and youth



Members of a junior youth group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo visit an orphanage.

Youth-Period-of-Service Programme

The ready response of individuals who “in the heyday of life and their prime of youth”³⁷ arise in service to the Cause was evident in the numerous offers of friends to dedicate a period of full-time service to the Faith, often by moving to nearby clusters to serve as homefront pioneers. While the primary focus of these youth was to help advance the processes of growth in the clusters where they were deployed, a profound process of personal transformation was a natural outcome of their efforts. The account below illustrates the transformative effect of a period of full-time service on a youth in the **Northwestern** region of the **United States**.

Within a week of the youth conference, a young lady

whose participation in the institute process had been limited joined the ‘Youth Service Programme’ and immediately participated in institute campaigns in **Tacoma** and **Redmond** for one month. As a result of this experience, she was inspired to move to a new cluster where, ten months later, she had become a pillar of the institute process, serving as an animator of a junior youth group, teaching a children’s class, and dedicating her efforts to accompanying and building capacity in those around her.

In some regions, national communities developed programmes for youth to prepare them for an intensive period of

full-time service. In **Colombia**, a youth-period-of-service programme helped raise the capacity of a number of young people to participate in building a pattern of community life in some emerging clusters in the northern part of the **Valle del Cauca** Department. The programme had specific goals, such as helping to nurture capacity in the youth to sustain a study circle until local tutors could arise, to initiate and sustain a junior youth group, and to strengthen their own Bahá’í identity. Its overall aim was to assist young people to develop an awareness of what it means to live a Bahá’í life rooted in service to the Cause and to humanity.



Participants of an intensive institute campaign for youth in Tacoma, United States.



A devotional gathering in Thames Valley, United Kingdom.

and adults began to engage in substantive discussions about the development of their neighbourhoods. A change in the relationship between youth and their parents became evident—the youth felt empowered, and the parents had more confidence in them and their abilities. In Mwinilunga East, there was also a notable increase in the participation of young women, who shouldered responsibilities in the community and served as animators and children’s class teachers.

In **Badulla, Sri Lanka**, a young homefront pioneer began conversations with 11 youth and their families and soon established bonds of friendship. Polarized by the caste system, these youth initially insisted on having two separate youth groups along caste lines. After completing Book 1,

however, all the participants gathered in the same home for a devotional meeting, breaking social norms. Building on the strength and unity of this initial experience, the young friends, whose numbers continued to grow, carried out service projects for the entire village. After attending the youth conference in **Kadugannawa**, they noticed that their relationships were no longer determined by caste but imbued with a spirit of mutual support. They consulted, planned, prayed, and served together with the help of the young pioneer, and their efforts led to the opening of 6 devotional meetings, a Book 2 study circle with 5 participants, 2 children’s classes with 9 children, and 5 junior youth groups with 37 participants.

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