

# A Flexible Format for Public Worship Programs

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Workshop on Integrating the Arts into Social & Economic Development  
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In its letter to the Bahá'ís of the world, dated December 28, 1999, the Universal House of Justice called on all communities to implement “regular meetings for worship open to all.” In response, the Bahá'ís of two local communities have been co-hosting a regular public worship program, held in a community center. Their Assemblies jointly decided to enhance the appeal of these programs by calling on local talents to integrate the arts into the worship services, especially with the use of live musicians. This has stirred enthusiasm in the community, and has attracted a number of seekers.

The present format for local, public worship programs was developed for and approved by the two Local Spiritual Assemblies. It presents Sacred Scripture from Bahá'í and other Holy Writings, makes provisions for including children, involves the use of arts in support of the worship experience, and is designed to respond to the spiritual needs of a multicultural public. The Assemblies offer it as a model which could be adapted for use in other local communities.

## **Suggested Guidelines for Bahá'í Public Worship Services**

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### ***Devotional Contents:***

1. The atmosphere of the event should be spiritual, dignified, reverential, and joyful.
2. The event should be designed to appeal to families, and should make provisions for the needs of children without segregating them.
3. Each devotional program should include, as a minimum, readings from the Sacred Writings and music.
4. The Sacred Writings should be predominantly from Bahá'í Scripture, but should also include passages from the Bible, Qur'án, and other Holy Books.
5. Since the nature of Bahá'í worship is flexible and calls on us to avoid creating rituals, the services should employ variety to keep from falling into fixed and rigid practices.
6. It would be helpful if the devotions committee prepared and copied a program sheet for each service, listing the quotations from the Sacred Writings and the musical selections, to be passed out to those attending.

### ***Including Youth and Children:***

7. As a permanent feature of the programs, youth and children should be given active roles and should be included as both readers and artistic performers.

### ***Use of Music:***

8. Preferably, the music presented in the worship service should be performed live. One reason for this is that the use of recorded music on audiotapes and CD's is not likely to appeal for long to the Bahá'í friends, or to draw and retain the attendance of the general public. Another reason is that the amount of appropriate music recorded by Bahá'ís is in any case limited.

9. Non-Bahá'í musicians may need to be contracted occasionally, perhaps even regularly, until we have an adequate number of friends in the Bahá'í community able to give some kind of musical presentation. Thirty to fifty dollars per hour for professional musicians is common in our region. The Assemblies will need to budget for this.

10. Well before the worship service, the committee should orient any non-Bahá'í musicians who are contracted, as to the purpose and nature of the Bahá'í devotional program. This will allow the musicians to prepare selections that fit the character of the service.

11. The program should include portions in which the attendants can participate by singing together as a group.

#### ***Use of Various Arts:***

12. Local Bahá'í talent in graphic arts should be recruited to create a set and backdrops which would add much to the spiritual atmosphere of the event.

13. The art of floral arrangement should also be employed, if affordable, to add to the spiritual atmosphere.

14. A variety of arts forms can be included.

#### ***Languages:***

15. Readings may occasionally be in any of the several languages used by ethnic groups in our area. Sometimes an ethnic group whose language is not the national one, will be predominant in a locality. In this case their language can be used regularly, though not exclusively, in the service. For example, in view of the large latino presence in our local population, portions of the reading should regularly be in Spanish.

#### ***Cultural Styles of Worship:***

16. The basic objective is to provide a regular worship service that will attract the consistent attendance of members of the Bahá'í community and the community at large. In a society as culturally diverse as the United States, the challenge is that both within and outside our local Bahá'í community a variety of cultures are represented. If we are to encourage the regular

attendance of people of various cultural backgrounds, it would be wise for the worship service to be designed in such a way as to make them feel welcome and acknowledged.

For this reason, the committee coined the term "cultural styles of worship" to refer to the various ways that different cultural groups have traditionally expressed their worship of God. In order to attract people of diverse backgrounds, whether Bahá'ís or seekers, each monthly worship program should acknowledge and incorporate more than one cultural style of worship, corresponding to the various ethnic and religious backgrounds represented in our cities. This should be done without compromising the sacred and reverential character of Bahá'í worship, and without involving practices that do not form a part of Bahá'í devotions -- such as congregational prayer.

One example of a cultural style of worship with which many of us are familiar might be called the "African American Christian worship style," in which the music may be exuberant and rhythmically animated, the worshippers feel free to clap their hands, sing along with the live musicians, vocally express their appreciation, and may rise as a group to dance in place. (This worship style was also adopted by a number of Protestant churches having white congregations in the southern United States.) In contrast to this is what might be called the "European Christian worship style," which tends to involve music that induces a state of meditation and reflection, and in which the worshippers' role is passive and their body motion limited mostly to sitting quietly.

Because the majority of Bahá'ís in the U.S. have until now come from the European Christian tradition, the worship style found in most Bahá'í meetings for worship has reflected this cultural background with the use of quiet, meditative music and a passive, physically motionless listening role for the participants. It is important to recognize that while this style is of course legitimate, it is not the only worship style possible within a Bahá'í context, but simply a reflection of the majority culture within the contemporary American Bahá'í community.

If we are to attract to our devotional meetings the members of a variety of cultures present in American society, we must, as Bahá'ís, be willing to stretch a little beyond the single worship style to which we are accustomed, and incorporate certain aspects of the styles of various cultures and communities. This will give clear evidence to the public that we are serious when we speak of unity in diversity. Again, this can be done without compromising the sacred and reverential character of Bahá'í worship.

***"Mood Contours":***

17. At first, it seemed that one way to include the needed variety in the devotional program

would be to incorporate into each service something from only one cultural worship style, which would change from service to service. For example, African American Christian one time, Native American the next, European Christian the next, Persian the next, and so on. Our concern, however, is that this approach would tend to attract the members of a given religious and cultural background to a single service with which they feel identified, but not to subsequent services. In the long run, this would hinder progress toward our objective, which is to make people from various cultural backgrounds feel welcome and to encourage their consistent attendance, whether they belong to the Bahá'í community or to the community at large. It is preferable, therefore, that varied styles of worship, corresponding to the religious and ethnic backgrounds in our local Bahá'í community and in the general community, be integrated within each devotional program.

One way to accomplish this, as regards the use of music, would be to start with tranquil, meditative music and readings, followed by music whose tempo is picking up, and finishing with music to which the audience would be invited to sing along and clap if appropriate. The "mood contour" of the program would in this case move from quiet and meditative to exuberant and energetic. The energy level would move from low to high, as would the level of audience participation. A specific example of this would be for the musical interludes between readings to start with an intimate Persian chant, follow with a stirring Bach prelude and end with a lively gospel choir. This is only one of several possible "mood contours" the program could have.

### ***Timing of Event:***

18. Devotional meetings will initially be once a month, on the second Sunday, to avoid conflicting with other Bahá'í activities.

19. The locale will need to be rented for at least two hours -- half an hour for setup, half an hour for the devotional program, half an hour for fellowship following the devotions, and half an hour for cleanup.

20. Following consultation, the committee concluded that Sunday in the early afternoon is the most recommendable time for devotions -- perhaps from 1 to 3 pm. The reasons are that weekdays are limited to evenings when people are tired and unlikely to take the family out, most families work or have recreation on Saturdays, and most church-goers attend church on Sunday morning.