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YoS Desk UK

Thoughts on a Bahá'í Year of Service

I AM WRITING as a follow up to my article in the May 2002 Bahá'í Journal. I have just finished nine months' service in the south of Chile and when I wrote in May, I was about half way through this period of service, so I am now speaking with probably a slightly different view; this is the beauty of hindsight.

It has been an amazing year. Year of service is a time when you are constantly surrounded by Bahá'ís, constantly thinking about the Bahá'í Faith, when your sense of Bahá'í identity is at its sharpest and your notion of serving the Cause is so clear. This is why this was a year I will always look back on and use as an example, a guideline for the rest of my life.



Florentine, front row left, with Chilean youth at the Bahá'í Radio station

A lot of people come back from their year of service very excited and completely in love with the country they served in. I never fell in love with Chile. It is not "my" country; I felt this immediately when I visited Peru or Brazil during various trips and I realised how attractive the latter countries were to me in comparison with Chile.

But since I was going to be staying in Chile for quite a while, I had the choice of accepting the country as it was or driving myself crazy complaining about everything. It would have been all too easy to be in a country that I loved from the start; there would have been no challenge, no test involved in that for me. So by overcoming this obstacle with time, I ended up more strengthened mentally, more serene, more ready to accept and tolerate, more open. Yet after all is said and done, I know that there will always be a bit of Chilean in me.

I think in mentioning serenity I have to pay a big tribute to the indigenous Mapuche culture in which I was immersed from the beginning to the end; the schools, the Bahá'í institute were all in the Mapuche areas and the Bahá'í radio was bilingual Mapuche-Spanish. What started out as a difficulty to accept new cultures turned out to be a blessing in disguise; because the traditions, culture and ways of these purehearted, tranquil people have changed my attitudes in ways I cannot describe. Although I never fell in love with the country, I fell head over heels for the Chilean Bahá'ís. They are not big in numbers (about 1000-2000 active Bahá'ís), but this makes them all the more united. Chile is a very long country (nearly four times the length of the UK), but distances seem like nothing to the Bahá'ís: they are constantly organising regional, interregional, national activities, especially the youth.

So, after attending the summer school, the national youth conference, the national convention, various regional and interregional gatherings (like for Ruhi training or youth gatherings) I found myself meeting so many people that I am slightly ashamed to admit

that I probably know more Bahá'ís in Chile than in the UK!

And, meeting these Bahá'ís from a completely different part of the globe and knowing we are all striving for the same thing, makes you realise the universality and grandeur of the Cause. One of the problems with a year of service (or period of service) is that once you have the hang of it and everything is up and running, it is already time to go. At the beginning I felt very lost, almost useless sometimes, but little by little, I set out my own timetable at the Bahá'í school during the week (activities during and after school) and at the institute and radio on week-ends. I ended up being so busy that I hardly even had time to do my laundry.

I think my year of service has made me realise that the Bahá'í Faith and serving humanity should not only be my religion, but my life.

I feel infinitely blessed to have been allowed to know the Bahá'í Faith so early on in life. And most of the Bahá'ís in the West are also very lucky in that they have the material means, making it a lot easier to do something about this blessing from God. This is why I highly encourage all Bahá'ís who can, to go out and do something like a year of service, or maybe even sponsor a youth who wants to do a year of service but cannot afford it.

Florentine Pepin

Year of Service Desk (YOSDeskUK)

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Committee for International Pioneering and Travel Teaching

Travel teaching in the Faroe Islands

TOWERING CLIFFS, vivid green hillsides and tumbling waterfalls, little black wooden houses with turf roofs, the evocative call of geese flying over the house and a school of dolphins swimming and leaping ahead of the ferry to Vagar Island — these are some of my memories of the Faroe Islands.

Having lived for several years in island communities in various parts of the world, I had felt drawn for some time towards travel teaching in the Faroes. So when the opportunity arose last September I went to the Faroes for one week. I spent the first five days in the capital, Torshavn, where I stayed in a comfortable and homely Bed & Breakfast. Many people speak English in the Faroes, especially young people, and Danish is also widely spoken. The proprietor of the B & B, however, hardly spoke any English at all, so we communicated in pidgin Danish. Most Faroese people are Lutherans and about 20% of the rest belong to sects such as the Plymouth Brethren, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists. Torshavn has an abundance of churches including several evangelical missions.

I had a warm welcome from the Bahá'ís in Torshavn, most of whom are pioneers, and spent my time exploring the picturesque narrow streets perched on the hillside overlooking the sea. There are two museums and several small but interesting art galleries, and I visited these in the hope of finding someone to chat to about the Faith. As I am a librarian by profession I visited the public library and talked with one of the staff about the possibility of adding Bahá'í books to their stock. I also went to the National Library where I had a long and friendly talk with one of the librarians about libraries in various parts of the world and was able to present a copy of the book "Visions of a New World Order" to the National Library. This beautiful book has recent photos of the buildings on the Arc including the Seat of the Universal House of Justice and the Centre for the Study of the Texts which now houses the Bahá'í World Centre Library. My Faroese colleague was suitably impressed and full of admiration for the elegant classical style of the buildings.

One day I walked out to the cemetery on the outskirts of Torshavn and visited the grave of

ESKIL LJUNDBERG, NINGIL OI BANAJA UA HAJI OI THE FAROE ISLANDS. TORSHAVN IS SMALL enough to make walking around it a comfortable option, but there are frequent buses and also taxis. The weather in the Faroes changes constantly and you can start out on a walk in bright sunshine only to find that heavy rain has set in – in which case it’s comforting to know that you’re on a bus route.

Torshavn has a fine modern Bahá’í Centre and I was invited to give a fireside there as part of the regular Tuesday evening Open House programme. We started the evening with prayers and at eight o’clock, in answer to our prayers, one Faroese lady, one Dutchman and an Icelandic lady with her six-year-old daughter arrived for the fireside. Two young Bahá’ís came from Runavik (a journey of an hour and a half) to swell the numbers. As these young men were half Swedish, half Greenlandish they complemented my theme of Unity in Diversity very nicely.

My presentation lasted about an hour. I talked about how I had become a Bahá’í in Fiji, talked about the Fiji Islands and the unity of races and religions that I had experienced there and showed slides of Fiji to illustrate my theme. The talk was well received with lots of audience participation. After extensive refreshments I finished by showing some slides of the Bahá’í Holy Places in Haifa, Bahjí and Akkí.

The next day I left Torshavn and travelled by bus to Toftir where Sue and Roy Philbrow, long-time pioneers in the Faroes, have made their home. Toftir is on the next island and I was able to enjoy the beautiful fjord scenery and many spectacular waterfalls as the bus followed the coast road, went through a long tunnel through the mountain and crossed to the island of Eysturoy via the “Bridge over the Atlantic” which connects the two islands.

At Sue and Roy’s home I met up again with their daughter Sley and we were able to exchange memories of our service together at the Bahá’í World Centre. That evening there was a gathering of the Bahá’í pioneers and their friends at the Philbrows’ home. I was invited to give a very informal talk and spoke for about an hour about being a pioneer in the Maldives. I felt this would be of some interest to the Faroes pioneers because the Bahá’í community in the Maldives is very isolated and cannot teach because it’s a Muslim country. I also mentioned going to India from the Maldives for the dedication of the House of Worship in 1986. There were two friends of the Bahá’ís present, a young Faroese girl and a young Bulgarian man.

The following day I left Toftir for the airport on Vagar Island. The journey to the airport involved taking four buses and a ferry and I was most impressed by the efficiency of the transport system. Whenever I had to change buses, which seemed invariably to be in the middle of nowhere, the next bus that I needed would appear over the horizon just at the desired moment and we would rendezvous successfully in the midst of the moors.

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to the Faroes and felt blessed with divine assistance throughout. If you would like to travel to somewhere with its own unique culture but not so very far away and to help spread the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh there, then I think you should consider a trip to the Faroe Islands.

Janet Fleming

From the Desk of the CIPTT

Where the needs...are especially pressing at the present time

IT’S THAT TIME of the year again! We know it as the month of fasting but for many of us it is a month of “slowing” as we deal with the physical effects. Nevertheless our eyes are turned to the spiritual horizon more than ever at this time and we have the time to dwell on both the broader vision of the Faith and our own inner reality and to rededicate ourselves to service to Bahá’u’lláh.

Are we involved in Study Circles? Are we taking an active part in our Cluster goal setting at a personal and collective level? Have we adopted an overseas goal to pray for, to support, perhaps to provide deputisation funding? Best of all have we decided to go travel teaching or pioneering and begun to plan our move?

On holiday we know how easy and safe it is to paddle in the shallows, by the water's edge. You are totally in control, you can test the temperature, get used to the waves and the surf and there are lots of other people around. You know that the further out you decide to go, the more necessary it is to have the skills to swim or windsurf to deal with the higher risk but the greater will be the sense of exhilaration, adventure and achievement.

We can all of us, every one, plan to paddle in the spiritual shallows of travel teaching this year, some will swim out and surf back as short term pioneers and some will feel inspired to take on an ocean voyage of service by long term pioneering.

If we plan ahead, even on the briefest of holiday breaks, we can take time out to contact the local Bahá'í community to encourage and support them. With cheap, almost give away flight offers to Europe and the Republic of Ireland we can do short international travel teaching trips, perhaps as an outcome to our Study Circle commitment to service.

What about those left on the beach who, by reason of age, infirmity or other personal circumstances, can't go in the water? Well, you can help a lot. You can encourage and support tentative beginners by holding them with the hand of prayer and provide the deputisation funding to go on their spiritual holiday in the first place!

Enough of this seaside holiday analogy! These are seriously challenging times. None more so than in the Category One goal countries. Did you realise that the World Centre itself has picked these out as places "where the needs...are especially pressing at the present time" and that Europe has the longest list of countries in this Category across the continents? Indeed, in the World Centre Category Two list of places where "pioneers and travelling teachers are needed to stimulate the process of growth and to assist in opening new centres", Europe also has the greatest number of countries. So, even on our own doorstep, there are many, many opportunities to paddle, swim, surf or voyage!

You almost know these by heart now, the goal countries in the Philip Hainsworth Campaign:

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|----------------------|-------------------|------------|-----------|
| Bosnia & Herzegovina | Cyprus (Southern) | Macedonia | Serbia |
| Croatia | Faroe Islands | Malta | Slovenia |
| Corsica | Kosovo | Montenegro | Vojvodina |

We urge you to look at the CIPTT website for information on the needs of each place. The website address is: www.bahai.org.uk/pioneers/

The user name and password are confidential to Bahá'ís and should not be distributed to others, not even Bahá'ís, over the internet, so contact the CIPTT before logging onto the website. If, or rather, when you decide to plan the details of your act of service please get in touch with the committee and let us help you get local contact names and numbers.

CIPTT

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Visit the CIPTT website at: www.bahai.org.uk/pioneers/