

GRACEMERE GROUPS OF FAMILIES, NORTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA, DECEMBER 2022

Gracemere is one of two sectors of Rockhampton community in Mari Cluster, Central Queensland. There are three Local Spiritual Assemblies and an Area Teaching Committee in the cluster. In April 2021, as part of a regional learning process, the North Rockhampton sector began to systematically learn about establishing groups of families. The commitment of the friends to this process of learning and being part of the region-wide initiative resulted in an expanding nucleus of families that met on a weekly basis – every Monday – and began to learn about a pattern of worship and service. The groups of families in North Rockhampton has gone from strength to strength, cycle after cycle.

In June 2022, after the World Conferences, two individuals from a household in Gracemere, who were regular participants at the North Rockhampton groups of families, set out, encouraged by others, to learn about establishing another group of families within their pocket. These friends acted without hesitation, confident that they will be assisted by institutions, and confirmed by the Blessed Beauty. They implemented the insights gained from the North Rockhampton groups of families, with the initiator of that group supporting them.

The Gracemere hub is within walking distance or a five-minute drive from one end to the other. The process began in Gracemere when these individuals from the household consulted and reached out to a few indigenous and non-indigenous families. The initial conversation with these families focused on an invitation to a social action project to establish household vegetable gardens. This instigated the coming together of families with a purpose. The families that showed interest were invited to a weekly dinner and discussion on Tuesday evenings. An unfolding conversation about building vibrant and purposeful communities which included the spiritual education of children, junior youth and the adults in the courses of the institute, was central to the groups of families. A small core group, consisting of three adults and a youth, took on the coordination and planning role.

The objects of learning for the Gracemere group of families are: How to form an expanding nucleus with an outward orientation? How to share the vision of Baha'u'llah to build a vibrant and purposeful community in Gracemere? How to share the vision of the training institute with the nucleus? How to move the participants through the sequence of courses and accompany them to become protagonists? How to accompany participants to hold devotional gatherings in their homes? How to accompany participants to become children's class teachers, animators, and tutors?

The nucleus was introduced to the vision of Baha'u'llah by watching "Global Vision... Local Action", "Widening Embrace" (Introduction and the Final chapters), exploring the themes from the World Conferences 2022 and conversations about the training institute as a path of service to humanity. At Week 3, Book 1 was introduced to the nucleus. The participants went through some the paragraphs of "A Few Thoughts for the Tutor" and the first two sections of Book 1, "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit".

In order to appreciate the meaning and significance of what they were committing to, it was made clear that the courses of the Institute focus on service and worship, the twofold moral purpose, the development of spiritual qualities, and capabilities and skills for service.

Subsequently, a Book 1 commenced with six participants. Various approaches were tested in consultation with the participants, to move through the Book in a reasonably spritely pace – with both weekly and weekend intensive sessions. This was to allow the friends to commence walking the path of service.

Participants were also introduced to collective prayer at week 3. A chant of ‘Strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers’ from YouTube was played. The words were written on a large piece of paper to facilitate all to read and chant along. Participants were encouraged to use their creativity and cultural background to share their own prayers. A number of individuals were not accustomed to the concept of prayer, especially collective prayer. Initially, discomfort and awkwardness were experienced when asking individuals to pray. This was gradually overcome by ensuring shorter and simple prayers were introduced including ‘O God Guide me’, ‘O God educate these children’ and ‘Blessed is the spot’. The participants became increasingly comfortable with saying prayers and looked forward to the devotions. The core team consulted about this issue, and it was decided that a junior youth, at the beginning of the gathering, would hand-out thoughtfully selected readings and quotes to all the participants – shorter ones for children and longer ones for adults. Now this has become a regular practice.

The nucleus meetings continue to be held regularly every Tuesday. The evening starts with potluck dinner. After devotions, those present reflect on the activities that have taken place and new ones being planned. The children are taught lessons from Grade 1, and the junior youth are studying the “Breezes of Confirmation” text. The adults explore various themes that bring them closer to the vision of Baha’u’llah and the institute process. Study circles i.e., Book 1 are held at a different time and space. This is because new participants are continually invited to the Tuesday space. The concept of service is discussed early on and regularly. Participants are provided the opportunity, and accompanied, to host devotional gatherings, and to become children’s class teachers or junior youth animators. The first natural activity to emerge was a children class, which was soon followed by a junior youth group. A youth from the new families is being accompanied by a mature and experienced youth who recently returned to Gracemere, to become the animator. The junior youth group organised its first service project which gave the group a sense of mission. The next frontier is for the nucleus to build capacity to read the evolving reality of the hub and consult more deeply on social issues and challenges.

Just over a cycle, the nucleus has grown from two individuals to 50 - children, youth and adults. Nineteen families are connected to the process. The core activities have grown from 0 to 9. As the nucleus has expanded the social action activities have increased. The number of families growing their own vegetables, has increased from one to five. A family festival planned and organised by the nucleus, after much consultation, was attended by 80 people (see photo). The additional contact and conversations that take place outside the Tuesday evening space, and other formal spaces, have strengthened the bonds of friendship and helped socialise concepts from Books 1 and 3. The participants do not need to be reminded of the Tuesday night space as it now belongs to them. They are actively inviting their friends and contacts to join. Welcoming new faces to the Tuesday night gatherings is not uncommon. Each new family is provided with an introduction to the overarching vision, concepts, and the core activities.

Key to the growth has been a warm and welcoming environment created at the nucleus space - ensuring that all feel welcomed and are embraced with love and kindness. Other contributing factors to strengthening of the process have been a lack of hesitancy to act, the nucleus members inviting their friends to join the process, a strong orientation to learning (study, consultation, reflection and action), flexibility and creativity, constancy of effort and regularity of the coming together of the nucleus (every Tuesday), participation of all in the training institute, having faith in the capacity of every individual to contribute and helping all to walk a path of service as soon as possible. Regular home visits have been an important element in sustaining the process. Presently, the core team meets weekly on Thursdays and has expanded to six adults and one youth. It maintains a weekly reflection and learning document.

Gracemere Family Picnic

One parent suggested to the groups organise a picnic to further strengthen bonds of friendship. It was agreed to go to the beach, and all made effort to bring food. The children and youth were very excited to go on a trip together. Although many families could not make it, it became a space to truly test their ability to work with new families. They enjoyed the time together. One could sense that there the connections were strengthened among the children, youth, adults and families.

On reflection among the team on the following Tuesday, the points raised were to consider a closer destination so that families who do not have transport could be assisted to attend, to find an appropriate spot to make it conducive for families to sit around each other, to eat together, play games and share stories. It was agreed that more of such spaces could be held to attract more families.



Gracemere Social Action

On 15 November 2022, one junior youth group in Gracemere met to consult on next steps. An opportunity was created to analyse statistics and understand social issues faced in Gracemere. They found out that there were 1,100 youth between the 10-15 years residing in Gracemere. They agreed that isolation leading to anxiety was becoming a growing problem. So, the junior youth suggested to the groups of families to host another Family Festival.

On 18 November 2022, the youth met for a weekly Youth Night and came up with the following potential projects that would be tailored towards social action. The three teams have identified the list of following social action to be consulted upon: clean up parks; help the elderly; plant trees; assist with school tutoring; establish a chicken farm; raise awareness about healthy eating habits (HEH); create spaces to socialise; create teamwork building exercises; prepare and distribute food for the homeless; and take care of abandoned animals.

Meeting with the Local Spiritual Assembly

This above analysis became a reason to write to the Local Spiritual Assembly to gain their insight, seek support, and demonstrate cooperation. The Local Spiritual Assembly responded with much encouragement and gave the group a time to meet. The Animators prepared the junior youth, and all came dressed up to meet the institutions. A chance meeting with a parent extended the invitation to her too.

The space was very warm and congenial. The junior youth group chanted the prayers they had been saying weekly at the nucleus meetings. The Assembly offered to provide any support needed for the Family Festival or other activities. After the meeting the youth and Animators, with the mother met to reflect. They agreed that they truly experienced happy feelings and were appreciative for the space.

