



# The Lamp

A NEWSLETTER PUBLISHED BY THE WILMETTE INSTITUTE

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### Local Study Groups Prove Popular

The Wilmette Institute's new approach to local study groups has been immediately popular and effective.

Local study groups date back to 1998, but the tuition they paid—20% less than the individual rate—depended on how large the group was. By making the rate \$300 regardless of the group's size, the Wilmette Institute hit on a formula that allowed the formation of large local study groups, and large groups produced a more effective face-to-face environment for learning. The result was immediately measurable in terms of registrations. The course **Living the Spiritual Life** (starting January 2003) had 37 students, 18 of which belonged to three local study groups; **Islam for Deepening and Dialogue** (February) had 29 students, 20 of whom belonged to four groups; **Bahá'í Administration and Community Development** (March) had 31 students, 9 of whom belonged to three study groups; and **Preparing for Interfaith Dialogue** (April) had 23 students, 18 of whom belonged to three local study groups. Thus in four months, of the 114 students who took Wilmette Institute courses, 59 (52%) belonged to local study groups, which averaged five students each (who paid an average of about \$60 each to take the course).

Local study groups have also received more services since January. They are supposed to meet at least twice per

### Basics? Beyond the Basics?

Potential students of the Wilmette Institute may find the range of the Wilmette Institute offerings confusing. But, in fact, the division is quite simple.

The Wilmette Institute has two programs: the Distance-learning Program and the Spiritual Foundations for a Global Civilization Program. The difference between them is easy to understand. The Distance-learning Program consists of a large number of Internet and Web-based courses, whereas Spiritual Foundations is a four-year program of comprehensive study of the Faith, currently based on attending a residential session in Wilmette. While it also uses the Internet and Web, by definition, the classroom requirement means that Spiritual Foundations is not "distance learning."

The Distance-learning Program, in turn, includes a group of courses designated **Basics of the Bahá'í Faith**. The group exists because the Universal House of Justice has called for training institutes to offer a systematic and formal series of courses to cover foundational matters as well as specialized subjects. One analogy the House of Justice uses is a tree, with its trunk and many branches. **Basics of the Bahá'í Faith** constitutes the trunk of the distance-learning tree; its four courses cover what the Faith is, how to study its scriptures, the nature and content of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, and its basic theology (concepts of

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## Streamlining the Spiritual Foundations Program

The Wilmette Institute Board recently made several decisions intended to broaden the appeal of the Spiritual Foundations for a Global Civilization Program and continue its functions into the future. The continuing success and expansion of the Institute's Distance-learning Program may be a factor in the declining number of people attending the Spiritual Foundations summer session. But learning over the Internet—even if it is cheaper and can be done whenever the student has spare time—cannot provide the impact or offer the transformative experience of face-to-face classes. Indeed, face-to-face classes may be ten times as effective in Bahá'í education as Internet courses. Consequently, the Board is determined to maintain the Spiritual Foundations Program.

Starting immediately, the application process for the Spiritual Foundations for a Global Civilization Program will be simplified. The requirements to send a letter of recommendation and copies of transcripts have been dropped. The registration process for the program now consists of completing the registration form and writing a brief statement indicating what the student wishes to gain from taking the program. The process is completed by sending a \$150 deposit.

Tuition is \$700, and financial assistance is available. Last year lodging was \$100 per week (\$14 per day, \$200 total), and meals at cafeterias and restaurants cost about the same (these are in addition to the tuition). If students cannot attend the entire two-week session and may be able to attend part of summer session, they should contact the coordinator, Robert Stockman, to ask about the portion of the program they can attend. The schedule of the summer program is available at <http://wilmetteinstitute.org>.

The students attending the summer session have said over and over again that the faculty have been fascinating, the fellowship memorable, the opportunity to pray daily at the House of Worship precious, and the impact life long. The Wilmette Institute hopes that, in spite of North America's frenetic pace of life, more students will find the time to come to Wilmette and feel their lives change. ▲

## Study Groups Popular . . . *Continued from page 1*

month and send a report to their mentor. The reports received have already shown the great value of the group experience. To stimulate discussion, each group has a mentor who is supposed to call or meet with them at least once per month (more often if requested). Some groups have taken advantage of this service, with mentors calling them as often as once per week.

Experience has already exposed one challenge: groups often have difficulty distributing the readings to all their members. To assist, the Wilmette Institute Board has decided to send two packages of readings to each group rather than one, so they have more readings to loan out or use for copying.

With the National Spiritual Assembly's statement making it clear that Wilmette Institute study groups do, indeed, constitute part of the institute process, and with the continued improvement in support for local study groups, the Wilmette Institute hopes to be in a position to increase greatly its service to the Bahá'í community and its role in the expansion of Bahá'í education. ▲

## Changes Coming to the Website

Watch the Wilmette Institute's website. In the next few months it will take on a whole new look. The main page will be more contemporary and user friendly, with a simplified navigational system. Behind the scenes, the new design will allow much easier and faster updating and correcting of the website.

Less visible will be the expanded abilities of the Wilmette Institute's database. Currently, students can use it to register for courses and pay their tuition, and Wilmette Institute staff can use it to generate course rosters. It is hoped that by the end of the year, faculty will be able to use the Web interface to enter student assessment and course completion information, and staff will be able to use it to generate invoices, mailing labels, and certificates of completion. The result should be better, more consistent record keeping and more efficient administration of the Wilmette Institute. ▲

## Basics and Beyond . . . *Continued from page 1*

God, revelation, Manifestation, creation, humanity, afterlife, and covenant). Together, they provide a fairly comprehensive basis for understanding the Bahá'í Faith and should equip anyone for further study. The four courses are offered on a two-year cycle.

For those who wish to study other aspects of the Bahá'í Faith systematically, there are the branches of the tree: the **Beyond the Basics** courses. They can be taken in any order and do not require completion of the "basics" courses first. **Beyond the Basics** includes at least seven distinct branches or groups of courses: on the ministry and writings of Bahá'u'lláh; on the ministry, writings, and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá; on the ministry and writings of Shoghi Effendi; on the messages of the Universal House of Justice and its agencies; on the development and history of the Bahá'í Faith; on the teachings and laws of the Bahá'í Faith; and on world religions from a Bahá'í perspective. **Beyond the Basics** includes about thirty-five courses that are repeated every four years, sometimes more often depending on demand. ▲

## Student News

Thanks so much for the email updates on the Wilmette Institute. I live in Olympia, Washington, and am a Bahá'í. I have been working on various issues facing our community like homelessness, welfare cuts and the plight of the single mother, and environmental concerns in relation to public transportation these past three years. I also attended large meetings for low-income people, and those of us present would name what we would like to see happen in terms of community here locally. It's amazing to me most of the wish-list involved being treated better as a human being, which is ultimately a spiritual quest.

While I would speak of my efforts working with these issues with local Bahá'ís, most of the people I worked with were not Bahá'í. Many in our local community are suffering the effects of the current world order of things, and as a Bahá'í I am frustrated we as Bahá'ís, in my opinion, are not living or creating anything new in terms of community, as Bahá'u'lláh asked of us. Maybe too many of us are still too

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## What do the Local Study Groups Say?

The value of local study groups is most eloquently conveyed by their participants, as this extract from the minutes of the Amherst, N.Y., local study group shows:

Meeting started with prayers, followed by a brief introduction to the course and the Wilmette Institute and review of logistics/mechanics of completing assignments, need for a final integrative presentation, etc. Questions regarding the above were answered. Feedback on the first three weeks was requested. Most are enjoying the course thus far - many have read and printed out the postings of others and done the reading. Only three of us have done postings ourselves, though; three others stated they would shortly; two. . . haven't started on the assigned material yet but actively participated in the discussions.

During the discussion portion the following points were discussed:

Is happiness a prerequisite for spirituality or a by-product? . . . Mention was made that many people who are not Bahá'ís or even religious seem genuinely happy and that being a Bahá'í or [a] person of religion doesn't seem to guarantee happiness. Someone suggested that those who are already happy may have greater capacity for developing spiritually and being receptive to the Faith in general. Discussion about distinction between ephemeral happiness vs abiding happiness.

Discussion on Obligatory Prayer was extensive. . . . [We read] from the text about the power of the Obligatory Prayer being greater than that of other prayers, about it protecting us from tests and difficulties, and about it engendering humility and submissiveness towards God. . . . Also discussed [the] simultaneous need to read the writings and meditate on them so as to deepen our understanding of who we are as created beings, who our Creator is and what our purpose is in relationship to Our Creator and His Creation, etc.

[The] final point of discussion was on "pure-hearted devotion. ▲

## The Wilmette Institute and the Institute Process

Several times in the last few months, the Wilmette Institute has been contacted by students with a very simple question: do local study groups “count” as study circles? In other words, is the Wilmette Institute with its local study efforts a part of the institute process? Two inquirers have even said that their local Auxiliary Board member had discouraged use of the Wilmette Institute because Ruhi “counted” and Wilmette didn’t.

The National Spiritual Assembly has now issued a new document that clarifies and resolves the issue. Titled “Vision and Evolution of the Institute Process in the United States Bahá’í Community,” the seven-page statement describes the basic purpose of the institute process; its need to reach very large numbers of people flexibly; the role of Counselors and Auxiliary Board members in its development; the involvement of spiritual assemblies in supporting institutes and directing the friends’ energies into service; the responsibilities of Regional Councils; the importance of encouraging a wide diversity of approaches; the foundational importance of flexibility in a culture of learning; the role of the National Teacher Training Center as a resource; the use of the Core Curriculum as a foundation for children’s classes in the United States; the importance of not stopping the service of an experienced teacher because he or she has never taken a prescribed series of courses; and the urgency of developing institutes.

On page 4, the section on “A Wide Diversity of Approaches” includes the following paragraph:

The training institute process in the United States Bahá’í community is founded on two pillars: the *Fundamental Verities* and the *Ruhi* materials. In the Five Year Plan, the National Assembly has called for the use of these two approaches and for the development of new curricula. Already, promising approaches such as *The Wilmette Institute*, *Seeker Follow-up Program*, *Heart to Heart*, *Teaching Christians*, *Book Zero*, and the *Mandala Training Program*, to name a few, provide systematic models to meet the wide diversity of needs among Bahá’ís and seekers alike.

The paragraph clearly indicates the importance of diversity in our systematic educational efforts; it singles out two “pillars” and a third choice, “development of new curricula.” The Wilmette Institute is prominently first in the list of examples given. The paragraph is masterfully phrased so that it encourages the emergence of other programs and curricula, rather than blocking new approaches because they are not on a preexisting list of approved programs.

From the point of view of the Wilmette Institute, the freedom of local believers to take our courses and consider themselves as participants in the institute process is abundantly clear. ▲

### Student News . . . Continued from page 3

much participating in the old world order of doing things. I am writing to let you know it’s great you are offering a course in Wilmette on how to develop “community” as I have felt it’s the single greatest challenge facing Bahá’ís today—that is, how to actually live the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh and to very literally create the “Kingdom of God on Earth.” I wish I could attend, it sounds like a great first step in the divine direction needed to transform the world into a spiritual paradise. . . .

Thank you for all your work,

Caryn Gayfield,

caryngayfield@hotmail.com.

I started one of your classes years ago and was not able to finish it because of my schedule. The information was wonderful and you and the dedicated instructors are amazing. The service all of you perform will receive high honors in the after-life with our Beloved... the people I know who have taken your courses love them.

Keep sending your news releases...

Nevada Metherd

Publisher, Northern Nevada Bahá’ís News

# Wilmette Institute Distance-Learning Course Schedule

Jan. 15-Apr. 31: **Living the Spiritual Life**  
 Mar. 1-May 31: **Islam for Deepening and Dialogue**  
 Mar. 15–June 15, 2003: **Bahá'í Administration and Community Development**  
 Apr. 15–July 15: **Preparing for Interfaith Dialogue: A Study of the Message "To the World's Religious Leaders"**  
 June 1–Sept. 30: **The Bahá'í Faith: A Comprehensive Introduction**  
 July 15–Oct. 15: **The Ministry of Shoghi Effendi**  
 Sept. 1–Nov. 30: **The Bahá'í Faith and the Establishment of World Peace**  
 Oct. 1–Dec. 31: **The Right of God: Huqúqu'lláh**  
 Nov. 1–Jan. 31: **Hidden Words, Seven Valleys, Four Valleys, Gems of Mysteries, and Other Early Mystic Works by Bahá'u'lláh**

Dec. 15–Mar. 15: **How to Study the Bahá'í Writings**

All distance-learning courses include e-mail listservers for students and faculty, regular conference calls, systematic lesson plans, and a wide variety of learning projects to help students apply their learning in their local communities. All courses are available at the "introductory" level for those unsure they can commit to taking a university-level course, the "intermediate" level for those wishing to go into more depth, and the "advanced" (graduate) level for those wishing to do extensive research or writing.

More information on all of them can be found on the Web at <http://www.wilmetteinstitute.org>. ▲

## The Lamp



THE LAMP is the newsletter of the Wilmette Institute, established in January 1995 by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States to offer academic, professional, and service-oriented courses related to the Bahá'í Faith. In addition to offering university-level courses on Bahá'í topics, the Wilmette Institute fosters Bahá'í scholarship; develops new, innovative curricular materials; creates high-quality courses on teaching the Faith; and refines Bahá'í concepts of pedagogy.

It aims to produce teachers and administrators of the Bahá'í Faith of great capacity, capable of sharing and demonstrating Bahá'í truths in their lives and speech.

For more information about the Bahá'í Faith, the Wilmette Institute, or its courses, contact:

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