

# **Fireside: A Working Definition**

by Darren Hiebert

Shoghi Effendi repeatedly stated that the “fireside” was the most effective means of teaching the Faith, and indicated that we each have an individual obligation to hold one at least once every Bahá’í month. As often as we make reference to this concept, it seems highly appropriate to review the definition of this effective teaching tool.

Shoghi Effendi provided the definition of a “fireside” as it applies to teaching the Bahá’í Faith. Below, the reader will find a collection of as many of the relevant passages which make reference to the word “fireside” as are believed to be available in currently published materials. No doubt, there are many other passages which relate to the concepts presented herein; however, only those which clearly provide a definition of the term “fireside” have been included.

From these quotations have been compiled a list of what may be considered the primary, or essential, elements of a fireside (numbers refer to the numbered passages below):

- A. Takes place in one's own home (per 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8)
- B. At least once in 19 days (per 5, 7, 8)
- C. Intent of showing Bahá’í hospitality and love (per 6, 7, 8)
- D. Small, personal, and informal, with close association and where intimate personal questions can be answered (per 1, 2, 7)
- E. Some phase of the Faith is mentioned and discussed (per 7, 8)
- F. Friends, neighbors and other new people invited (per 4, 5, 8)
- G. Guests introduced to a few, pre-selected believers (per 2)

The above points fall into two categories: those which pertain to a single “fireside” (e.g. A, C, D, E, F) and those which pertain to the fireside as an ongoing process (e.g. B, F, G). It seems clear that the necessary elements for a teaching opportunity to be classified as a “fireside” are as follows:

## **Definition of a fireside meeting**

- a. Friends and neighbors are invited into one's own home with the intent of showing Bahá’í hospitality and love
- b. Some phase of the Faith is mentioned and discussed
- c. Small, personal, and informal, with close association and where intimate personal questions can be answered

So what have we learned? First and foremost, that the stereotype of a fireside as big gathering where a bunch of strangers come to hear an invited speaker probably does not qualify as a “fireside” on more than one account. For one, few people would be willing to share “intimate personal questions” in such an environment. This is not to say that such meetings do not have value--after all, this author's own curiosity was first piqued at just such an event. Nevertheless, where he eventually developed a close association with the spirit of the Faith was only in the home of one Bahá’í couple who held what served as an excellent example of Shoghi Effendi's definition of “fireside”. This also means that we don't hold firesides (“the most effective” method, as defined by Shoghi Effendi) on the phone, in a parking lot, or at work.

Perhaps some of the friends feel daunted by the thought of having to hold a fireside every 19 days. Let us look, however, at an example of how a teacher of the Faith might fulfill the above conditions in her own approach to a real fireside:

The teacher invites one of her neighbors or coworkers to “stop by” for coffee. During the course of conversation during this visit, she could either tie in some aspect of the teachings with a topic under discussion, or she could initiate discussion by saying something such as “Bahá'u'lláh stresses the importance of racial unity. How do you feel about this issue?” or “Have you ever considered the benefits that would be achieved by the equality of women and men? The writings of my faith state that 'when women participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world...war will cease.' ”

Hence, the teacher will have fulfilled all of the elements provided as above in “Definitions of a fireside meeting”. Whew! That was easy! Note that the above scenario does not even present the comment with direct teaching. It merely mentions and discusses some phase of the Faith. If the guest responds positively, we can then teach more directly. If not, we have not placed them in any uncomfortable position of talking directly about the Faith. Rather, we are merely mentioning and discussing some phase of the Faith.

## **PASSAGES:**

All of the following passages are from letters written on behalf of the Guardian:

1. The believers are entirely free to hold as many little teaching groups or Fire-sides as they please in their own homes...In fact this personal, informal, home teaching is perhaps the most productive of results.

*(to an individual believer, February 24, 1950; cited in the compilation Teaching: The Greatest Gift of God, p. 29)*

2. ...One of the best ways to teach is what the Americans call a 'fireside', in other words a little group of your friends in your own home, to whom you can introduce a few believers whom you feel would be congenial and help confirm them. When you have made them true Bahá'ís, then take them to the community and let them be accepted. In this way they are protected from tests until their faith is really strong.

*(to an individual believer, March 18, 1950; cited in Lights of Guidance, #833)*

3. ...It should not be overlooked, however, that the most powerful and effective teaching medium that has been found so far is the fireside meeting, because in the fireside meeting, intimate personal questions can be answered, and the student find the spirit of the Faith more abundant there.

*(to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Punta Arenas, December 11, 1952; cited in the compilation Teaching: The Greatest Gift of God, p. 31)*

4. The Guardian feels that the most effective way for the Bahá'ís to teach the Faith is to make strong friends with their neighbours and associates. When the friends have confidence in the Bahá'ís and the Bahá'ís in their friends, they should give the Message and teach the Cause. Individual teaching of this type is more effective than any other type.

The principle of the fireside meeting, which was established in order to permit and encourage the individual to teach in his own home, has been proven the most effective instrument for spreading the Faith.

*(to an individual believer, December 27, 1954; cited in the compilation Teaching: The Greatest Gift of God, p. 32)*

5. ...I would like to comment that it has been found over the entire world that the most effective method of teaching the Faith is the fireside meeting in the home. Every Bahá'í as a part of his spiritual birthright, must teach, and the one avenue where he can do this most effectively is by inviting friends into his home once in 19 days, and gradually attracting them to the Cause. After the individuals have confidence in the pioneer, and the pioneer in the individuals, then they can be taught and confirmed in the Faith. This method is far more effective than advertising in newspapers, public lectures, etc. The Guardian is encouraging the believers over the world, including those on the home fronts, to engage in this method of teaching.

*(to the Bahá'í Group of Key West, Florida, March 31, 1955: Bahá'í News, No. 292, pp. 9-10; cited in Lights of Guidance, #828)*

6. ...The most effective method of teaching is the Fireside group, where new people can be shown

Bahá'í hospitality, and ask all questions which bother them. They can feel there the true Bahá'í spirit—and it is the spirit that quickeneth.

*(to an individual believer, October 20, 1956; cited in the compilation Teaching: The Greatest Gift of God, p. 36)*

7. The Guardian hopes the Friends...will display the loving spirit of the Master in their contacts, and then win those souls to the Faith. The fireside method of teaching seems to produce the greatest results, when each one invites friends into their homes once in 19 days, and introduces them to the Faith. Close association and loving service affects the hearts; and when the heart is affected, then the spirit can enter. It is the Holy Spirit that quickens, and the Friends must become channels for its diffusion.

*(to an individual believer, January 27, 1957; cited in the compilation Teaching: The Greatest Gift of God, p. 37)*

8. The friends must realize their individual responsibility. Each must hold a Fireside in his or her home, once in 19 days, where new people are invited and where some phase of the Faith is mentioned and discussed. If this is done with the intent of showing Bahá'í hospitality and love, then there will be results. People will become interested in 'what' you are interested in, and then be interested in studying. Individual firesides will bring the knowledge of the Faith to more people, under favorable circumstances, and thus constantly enrich its circle of friends, and finally its members. There is no substitute for the teaching work of the individual.

*(to an individual believer, March 6, 1957: Bahá'í News, No. 317, p. 4; cited in Lights of Guidance, #829)*