

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

28 December 2010

To the Conference of the
Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

Fifteen years have elapsed since, on an occasion such as this, we gave to the body of Counsellors assembled in the Holy Land the first intimation of the course the Bahá'í community would have to take, if it was to accelerate the dual process of its expansion and consolidation—a course which its accumulated experience had prepared it to steer with confidence. No need to remark on the distance traversed in a short decade and a half. The record of accomplishments speaks for itself. Today we invite you to begin deliberations on the next stage of the great enterprise on which the Bahá'í world is embarked, a stage that will stretch from Riḍván 2011 to Riḍván 2016, constituting the first of two consecutive Five Year Plans that will culminate at the centenary of the inauguration of the Faith's Formative Age. Over the coming days you are asked to formulate a clear conception of how the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will assist the community in building on its extraordinary achievements—extending to other spheres of operation the mode of learning which has so undeniably come to characterize its teaching endeavours, gaining the capacity needed to employ with a high degree of coherence the instruments and methods which it has so painstakingly developed, and increasing well beyond all previous numbers the ranks of those who, alive to the vision of the Faith, are labouring so assiduously in pursuit of its God-given mission.

In our Riḍván message this year, we described the dynamics of the process of learning that, through four successive global Plans, has steadily gathered momentum, enhancing the capacity of the friends to engage in grassroots action. The vista from this vantage point is stupendous indeed. With more than 350,000 souls worldwide who have completed the first institute course, capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character has risen perceptibly. In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends. A near doubling in the reserve of Bahá'í children's class teachers in a five-year period, bringing the total to some 130,000, has made it possible for the community to respond wholeheartedly to the spiritual aspirations of the young. A sixfold increase in capacity over the same period to assist junior youth in navigating through such a crucial stage of their lives provides an indication of the level of commitment to that age group. What is more, everywhere, a notable number of friends find themselves ready to enter into conversation with people of varied backgrounds and interests and to undertake with them an exploration of reality that gives rise to a shared understanding of the exigencies of this period in human history and the means for

addressing them. And fuelling the systematic multiplication of core activities across the globe, with no fewer than half a million known participants at a given time, are the efforts of close to 70,000 friends capable of serving as tutors of study circles.

As made clear in our Riḍván message, in the system thus created to develop its human resources, the community of the Greatest Name possesses an instrument of limitless potentialities. Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order. A decade ago, when we introduced the concept of a cluster—a geographic construct intended to facilitate thinking about the growth of the Faith—we provided an outline of four broad stages along the path of its development. As the Bahá'í community set about implementing the provisions of the Plan, this outline proved immensely useful in giving shape and definition to what is essentially an ongoing process. The abundant experience which has since accrued enables the believers now to conceive of the movement of a population, propelled by mounting spiritual forces, in terms of a rich and dynamic continuum. A brief review of the process that unfolds in a cluster, though well familiar to you all, will serve to underscore its fundamentally organic nature.

A programme of growth

Invariably, opportunities afforded by the personal circumstances of the believers initially involved—or perhaps a single homefront pioneer—to enter into meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents dictate how the process of growth begins in a cluster. A study circle made up of a few friends or colleagues, a class offered for several neighbourhood children, a group formed for junior youth during after-school hours, a devotional gathering hosted for family and friends—any one of these can serve as a stimulus to growth. What happens next follows no predetermined course. Conditions may justify that one core activity be given precedence, multiplying at a rate faster than the others. It is equally possible that all four would advance at a comparable pace. Visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities. But irrespective of the specifics, the outcome must be the same. Within every cluster, the level of cohesion achieved among the core activities must be such that, in their totality, a nascent programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived. That is to say, in whatever combination and however small in number, devotional gatherings, children's classes and junior youth groups are being maintained by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster. This initial flow of human resources into the field of systematic action marks the first of several milestones in a process of sustainable growth.

All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members. To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants. In this, as in all their work, they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the

basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

Increasing intensity

It is important to note that, as a programme of growth is being brought into existence, an emergent community spirit begins to exert its influence on the course of events. Whether activities are scattered across the cluster or concentrated in one village or neighbourhood, a sense of common purpose characterizes the endeavours of the friends. Whatever level of organization served to channel the early manifestations of this spirit, the systematic, coordinated multiplication of core activities necessitates that higher levels soon be attained. Through various measures, greater structure is lent to activity, and initiative, shaped largely by individual volition before, is now given collective expression. A complement of coordinators appointed by the institute moves into place—those for study circles, for junior youth groups, and for children's classes. Any order of appointment is potentially valid. Nothing less than an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground should make this determination, for what is at stake is not compliance with a set of procedures but the unfoldment of an educational process that has begun to show its potential to bring about the spiritual empowerment of large numbers.

Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process, other administrative structures are gradually taking shape. Out of the occasional meetings of a few believers emerge the regular deliberations of an expanding core group of friends concerned with channelling into the field of service an increasing store of energy. As the process of growth continues to gather momentum, such an arrangement ultimately fails to satisfy the demands of planning and decision making, and an Area Teaching Committee is constituted, and reflection meetings institutionalized. In the joint interactions of the Committee, the institute and the Auxiliary Board members, a fully fledged scheme for the coordination of activities becomes operational—with all the inherent capacity needed to facilitate the efficient flow of guidance, funds, and information. By now, the process of growth in the cluster will conform to the rhythm established by pronounced cycles of expansion and consolidation, which, punctuated every three months by a meeting for reflection and planning, are unfolding without interruption.

Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics. Specifically, the sequence of courses that we have recommended for use by institutes everywhere, which is facilitating so effectively the process of transformation under way, is designed to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance. The nature of relationships among individuals in this environment, all of whom consider themselves as treading a common path of service, was explained briefly in our Ridván message.

We also indicated there that such an environment is not without its effects on the administrative affairs of the Faith. As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over-instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.

Within this landscape of unfolding processes, emerging structures, and enduring fellowship, that moment which has come to be known as the “launching” of an intensive programme of growth represents conscious recognition that all the elements necessary to accelerate the expansion and consolidation of the Faith are not only in place but also functioning with an adequate degree of effectiveness. It signals the maturation of an ever-expanding, self-sustaining system for the spiritual edification of a population: a steady stream of friends is proceeding through the courses of the training institute and engaging in the corresponding activities, which serves, in turn, to increase the number of fresh recruits into the Faith, a significant percentage of whom invariably enters the institute process, guaranteeing the expansion of the system. This constitutes another milestone that the friends labouring in every cluster must, in time, reach.

In reiterating here much of what we have stated on previous occasions, we hope to have impressed upon you how readily the movement of a population, inspired by the purpose and principles of the Cause, can be nurtured, when not made the object of extraneous complications. We have no illusion that the path traced out so summarily above is devoid of difficulty. Progress is achieved through the dialectic of crisis and victory, and setbacks are inevitable. A drop in participation, a disruption in the cycles of activity, a momentary breach in the bonds of unity—these are among the myriad challenges that may have to be met. Not infrequently the rise in human resources, or the ability to mobilize them, will fall short of the demands of rapid expansion. Yet the imposition of formulas on the process will not result in a pattern of growth characterized by the desired equilibrium. Temporary imbalances in the progress of different activities are intrinsic to the process, and they can be adjusted over time, if dealt with patiently. Scaling back one activity that is flourishing, on the basis of theoretical conceptions of how balanced growth can be achieved, often proves counterproductive. While the friends in a cluster might well benefit from the experience of those who have already established the necessary pattern of action, it is only through continued action, reflection and consultation on their part that they will learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come.

Today, there are some 1,600 clusters worldwide where the friends have succeeded in creating the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth. Though significant, this accomplishment can by no means be considered the culmination of the process that has gathered momentum in each cluster. New frontiers of learning are now open to the friends, who are asked to dedicate their energies to the creation of vibrant communities, growing in size and reflecting in greater and greater degrees Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity.

Such clusters will also need to serve as reservoirs of potential pioneers that can be dispatched, largely across the home front, to cluster after cluster, shedding in some the first rays of the light of His Revelation and strengthening in others the presence of the Faith, enabling all to progress quickly to the first milestone along the path of development, or beyond. With this in mind, we will call upon the community of the Most Great Name at Ridván 2011 to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a programme of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.

Advancing the frontiers of learning

What we have described in the preceding paragraphs and in so many messages over the last decade and a half can best be viewed as the latest in a series of approaches to the growth of the Bahá'í community, each suited to specific historical circumstances. This divinely propelled process of growth was set in motion by the fervour generated in the Cradle of the Faith more than one hundred and sixty years ago, as thousands responded to the summons of a New Day, and received impetus through the exertions made by early believers to carry the message of Bahá'u'lláh to neighbouring countries in the East and scattered pockets in the West. It acquired greater structure through the Tablets of the Divine Plan revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and gained momentum as the friends spread out systematically across the globe under the direction of the Guardian to establish small centres of Bahá'í activity and erect the first pillars of the Administrative Order. It gathered force in the rural areas of the world as masses of humanity were moved to embrace the Faith, but slowed considerably as the friends strove to discover strategies for sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. And, for fifteen years now, it has been steadily accelerating since we raised the call at the outset of the Four Year Plan for the Bahá'í world to systematize the teaching work on the basis of the experience it had gained through decades of difficult but invaluable learning. That the current approach to growth, effective as it is, must evolve still further in complexity and sophistication once it has taken root in a cluster, demonstrating ever more notably the "society-building power" inherent in the Faith, few would fail to recognize.

Referring to the development of the global Bahá'í community, how often did the beloved Guardian encourage the friends to remain resolute in their purpose and persevere in their endeavours. "Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses," he noted with satisfaction, "they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop." "It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive," he reminded them, that "constitutes the one hope" of a disillusioned humanity. That this process will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time "its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order" is clear from his writings. "In a world the structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anaemic and lost their virtue," he asserted so emphatically, "this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive," is "taking shape," is "crystallizing into institutions," and is "mobilizing its forces".

What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá'í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.

Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan. Wherever an intensive programme of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people. Let them not lose sight of the remarkable receptivity they found—nay, the sense of eager expectation that awaited them—as they gained confidence in their ability to interact with people of all walks of life and converse with them about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. Let them hold fast to the conviction that a direct presentation of the Faith, when carried out at a sufficient level of depth and reinforced by a sound approach to consolidation, can bring enduring results. And let them not forget the lessons of the past which left no doubt that a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause, no matter how resourceful, no matter how consecrated, cannot attend to the needs of communities comprising hundreds, much less thousands, of men, women and children. The implications are clear enough. If, in a cluster, those shouldering responsibility for expansion and consolidation number in the tens, with a few hundred participating in the activities of community life, both figures should rise significantly so that by the end of the Plan, one or two hundred are facilitating the participation of one or two thousand.

It is heartening to see that, already in some 300 of the 1,600 clusters worldwide with intensive programmes of growth in operation, the believers have entered the new arena of learning now open to them, and, in more than a few, they are extending its frontiers. Clearly, in all such clusters, strengthening the educational processes set in motion by the training institute, each with its own requisites—regularly held classes for the youngest members of society, close-knit groups for junior youth, and circles of study for youth and adults—is of paramount importance. Much of what this work entails was discussed in the *Riḍván* message. Without exception, having witnessed the transformative effects of the institute process first hand, the friends in such clusters are striving to gain a fuller appreciation of the dynamics that underlie it—the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God. Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false

dichotomies; the stress they lay on memorization of the Creative Word; and the care they exercise in raising consciousness, without awakening the insistent self.

Enhancing administrative capacity

Though the central elements of the process of growth remain unchanged in the clusters in the vanguard of learning, sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity. Different innovations have already been introduced, on the basis of both geographic considerations and numerical growth. The division of the cluster into smaller units, the decentralization of the reflection meeting, the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators, the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field—these are some of the arrangements that have been made thus far. We have every confidence that, with your able assistance, the International Teaching Centre will follow these developments over the course of the next Plan, helping to consolidate the lessons learned into well-proven methods and instruments. To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.

Whatever the nature of the arrangements made at the cluster level for coordinating large-scale activity, continued progress will depend on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and on the increased capacity of Regional Bahá'í Councils and ultimately National Spiritual Assemblies. In the Riḍván message we expressed pleasure at noting the growing strength of National Assemblies, and we look to the coming five years with optimism, certain that we will see significant leaps forward in this respect. Moreover, we have no doubt that, in concert with National Assemblies, you will be able to help Regional Councils enhance their institutional capacity. There are currently 170 such administrative bodies in 45 countries worldwide, and their number is sure to climb during the next Plan. It will be imperative that all Regional Councils pay close attention to the operation of the training institute and the functioning of Area Teaching Committees. With this in mind, they will find it necessary to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it. These will include a well-functioning regional office that provides the secretary with basic organizational support; a sound system of accounting that accommodates diverse channels for the flow of funds to and from clusters; an efficient means of communication that takes into consideration the reality of life in villages and neighbourhoods; and, where warranted, physical structures that facilitate intensified and focused activity. What is important to acknowledge in this respect is that only if the Councils themselves are engaged in a process of learning will such mechanisms prove to be effective. Otherwise, while ostensibly created to support learning in action by an increasing number of participants in neighbourhoods and villages, systems being developed may well work against it in subtle ways, stifling, unintentionally, rising aspirations at the grassroots.

While collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils will be one of your primary concerns, your auxiliaries will need to direct more and more of their energies towards fostering institutional capacity at the local level, where the demands of community building assert themselves so unmistakably. To help you envision what lies ahead of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants everywhere, particularly in clusters

experiencing large-scale expansion and consolidation, we ask you to reflect, first, on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many rural areas of the world, in which the vast majority of such clusters today are to be found.

As you are aware, often in a rural cluster made up of villages and perhaps one or two towns, while the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth is being established, the efforts of the friends are confined to a few localities. Once in place, however, the pattern can be extended quickly to village after village, as explained in our Ridván message this year. Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward: Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member's personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the programme for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word." Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And

sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly’s growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly’s mind. And when inevitable problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

As the community grows in size and in capacity to maintain vitality, the friends will, we have indicated in the past, be drawn further into the life of society and be challenged to take advantage of the approaches they have developed to respond to a widening range of issues that face their village. The question of coherence, so essential to the growth achieved thus far, and so fundamental to the Plan’s evolving framework for action, now assumes new dimensions. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised.

Our Riḍván message described a few of the characteristics of social action at the grassroots, and the conditions it must meet. Efforts in a village will generally begin on a small scale, perhaps with the emergence of groups of friends, each concerned with a specific social or economic need it has identified and each pursuing a simple set of appropriate actions. Consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find constructive expression. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them—the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá’í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance. Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends to take advantage of methods and programmes of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá’í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

What is outlined in the foregoing paragraphs represents only a few of the attributes which Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many villages of the world will gradually develop in serving the needs of communities that embrace larger and larger numbers. As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as “the trusted ones of the Merciful among men”. Thus will these Assemblies become “shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.”

Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly’s development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population. The first necessitates the division of the Assembly’s area of jurisdiction into neighbourhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each. The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area—social, political, and cultural—with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

Service on Bahá’í institutions

In setting out for you in these pages developments we are eager to see in the administrative work of the Faith during the next Five Year Plan, we are reminded of the repeated warnings raised by the Guardian in this regard. “Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause,” he stated, “we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created.” The Bahá’í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, “is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself”. It is intended, he made clear, “to serve a twofold purpose”. On the one hand, “it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion” of the Cause “along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal.” On the other, “it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved.” And he went on to explain: “It should both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá’í community.”

It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá’í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be

called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá'í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honour in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they "must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá'í Community and promote the common weal." Bahá'í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá'í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell us that "when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire's distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it." As He averred, "ye must in this matter—that is, the serving of humankind—lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice."

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Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God, to promote learning, and to assist all in their endeavours to develop an upright and praiseworthy character. When the North American Bahá'í community embarked on its first Seven Year Plan, in pursuit of the responsibilities with which it had been charged in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian addressed to the friends in that land a letter of considerable length and great potency, dated 25 December 1938, subsequently published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Elaborating on the nature of the tasks at hand, the letter made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá'í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, "stand out as preeminent and vital": rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice. Given the conditions of the world today, you would do well to reflect on the implications of his observations for the global effort of the Bahá'í community to infuse cluster after cluster with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the "justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness" that must "distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá'í community." Though applicable to all its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its "elected representatives, whether local, regional, or national," whose sense of moral rectitude should stand in clear contrast to "the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests". The Guardian called for "an abiding sense of undeviating justice" in a "strangely disordered world" and quoted extensively from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, setting the sights of

the friends on the highest standards of honesty and trustworthiness. He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their lives—in their business dealings, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—and to observe its requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws and principles of the Faith. That political life everywhere has continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate in the intervening years, as the very conception of statesmanship has been drained of meaning, as policies have come to serve the economic interests of the few in the name of progress, as hypocrisy has been allowed to undermine the operation of social and economic structures, is evident. If indeed great effort was required for the friends to uphold the high standards of the Faith then, how much greater must be the exertion in a world that rewards dishonesty, that encourages corruption, and that treats truth as a negotiable commodity. Profound is the confusion that threatens the foundations of society, and unwavering must be the resolve of all those involved in Bahá'í activity, lest the slightest trace of self-interest becloud their judgement. Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching Committee, every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and all members of every local, regional and national Bahá'í body, whether elected or appointed, appreciate the significance of the Guardian's plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of the moral rectitude which he described with such clarity. May their actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its high destiny and its inherent nobility.

No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá'í enterprise today are the Guardian's forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, "with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness". He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied "by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters". We need not provide for you here evidence of the influence that such a deficient code now exerts on humanity as a whole; even the remotest spots on the globe are captivated by its enticements. Yet we feel compelled to mention a few points related specifically to the theme of purity. The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. And in this the friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the present-day order" must "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." Throughout the world today, young people are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Plan and the most ardent champions of the Cause; their numbers will, we are certain, increase from year to year. May every one of them come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.

The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that "any division or cleavage" in the ranks of the Faith "is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals." He made clear that the friends should manifest "complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings

with peoples of a different race, class, creed, or colour.” He went on to discuss at length the specific question of racial prejudice, “the corrosion of which,” he indicated, had “bitten into the fibre, and attacked the whole social structure of American society” and which, he asserted at the time, “should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá’í community at the present stage of its evolution.” Independent of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures taken by the American nation, and the Bahá’í community evolving within it, in addressing this particular challenge, the fact remains that prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity. While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

The educational process associated with the training institute is, of course, helping to foster the spiritual conditions to which the Guardian referred in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, along with the many others mentioned in the writings that must distinguish the life of the Bahá’í community—the spirit of unity that must animate the friends, the ties of love that must bind them, the firmness in the Covenant that must sustain them, and the reliance and trust they must place on the power of divine assistance, to note but a few. That such essential attributes are developed in the context of building capacity for service, in an environment that cultivates systematic action, is particularly noteworthy. In promoting this environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of two fundamental, interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated by Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be eschewed.

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Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá’í life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Bahá’í activity. The magnitude of the challenge facing the friends in this respect is not lost on us. They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programmes, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences. At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of society, remoulding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end, they must remain acutely aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing—this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without

assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society. There are a few specific points we wish to mention in this connection.

It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyse but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: “We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.” How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown. Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of Bahá’í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a programme of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.

Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort. The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá’í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project with a clear beginning and a definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community. Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamouring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. The worldwide crisis of authority provides proof enough. So grievous have been its abuses, and so deep the suspicion and resentment it now arouses, that the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable—a situation made all the more perilous by the weakening of community ties.

Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation. No sooner had “the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.” The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe. So it is that the individual, with no regard for “personal benefits and selfish advantages,” comes to see him- or herself as “one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing,” whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the friends come to recognize that “wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort” are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that “the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” and that “the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.” And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order.

And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian's words that “their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent.” “Never” would they be “led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles.” “With extreme humility,” they approach their tasks and “endeavour, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their

candour, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection.” Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious.

Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes: “When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendours of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.”

As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the followers of Bahá’u’lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.

The Universal House of Justice