

Framework for Action



Selected Messages of
the Universal House of Justice
and Supplementary Material
2006–2016



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Preface

A second decade has passed since the introduction of the Four Year Plan, when the Universal House of Justice set the Bahá'í world on an unprecedented course of action. Those four years marked “an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude,” and that Plan acquired “a special place in the scheme of Bahá'í and world history.” Since 1996, the Bahá'í world has pursued a series of Plans that would take it to the end of the first century of the Formative Age, and each of these Plans contributed in its own unique way to the pursuit of a single, overarching aim: advancing the process of entry by troops.

Much of the guidance provided by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'í world in the first decade after 1996 was captured in the book *Turning Point*. This volume, *Framework for Action*, organized in much the same way, covers the past decade from 2006-2016. Its three parts include messages from the House of Justice, letters written on its behalf, and supplementary materials.

In the past ten years, the systematic efforts of the Bahá'í community-reinforced by a learning process involving study, consultation, action, and reflection that stretches from the grass roots in neighborhoods and villages worldwide to the international level-have grown stronger, deeper, and more complex. In 2006, at the end of the first of a series of four Five Year Plans, only the first glimmerings of an intensive program of growth had emerged, and a new pattern of action was consolidated in but a few score clusters. The first elements of an evolving framework for action had just emerged, which, in the past decade, has been more fully understood, elaborated, and exploited. Among the many important concepts and practices that received attention over this period were the systematization of cycles of growth, the learning mode, the functioning of the Auxiliary Boards, the training institute as an educational process with three distinct stages, institutional capacity at the cluster and regional levels, the movement of youth, accompaniment, a coherent life of service, social action, involvement in the discourses of society, and universal participation. The movement of clusters along a developmental path marked by a series of milestones has now become well understood, such that some two hundred clusters have been able to create a pattern of community life that embraces a thousand or thousands, while some five thousand additional clusters follow in this well defined pattern of action. On the horizon, a fourth milestone, as yet undefined, anticipating a breakthrough in the movement of populations, beckons. At all levels from neighborhoods to nations, thoughtful individuals and institutions from the wider society are increasingly expressing appreciation for the contribution Bahá'ís are making to address the needs of society. Thus, although much remains to be done in the fast fleeting years of the end of the first century of the Formative Age, the essential challenge that the Bahá'í world faced in 1996 has already been well met. The process of entry by troops, which began in the Ten Year Crusade during the final years of the life of Shoghi Effendi, and which brought him so much joy, labored on for four decades as the Bahá'í world tried to resolve the challenge of attaining a balance between the processes of expansion and consolidation. Membership grew to more than five million by 1996, but where rapid growth took place, community building could not keep pace, and where communities and institutions grew strong, substantial growth was often unrealized. Thus, at the start of the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice called upon individuals, communities, and institutions to come together in a new mode of action that would harmonize expansion and consolidation in a systematic and sustainable pattern of action. The House of Justice described the essence of the challenge at that time:

With the growth in the number of enrollments, it has become apparent that such occasional courses of instruction and the informal activities of community life, though important, are not sufficient as a means of human resource development, for they have resulted in only a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause. These believers, no matter how dedicated, no matter how willing to make sacrifices, cannot attend to the needs of hundreds, much less thousands, of fledgling local communities. Systematic attention has to be given by Bahá'í institutions to training a significant number of believers and assisting them in serving the Cause according to their God-given talents and capacities. (26 December 1995)

Whereas in 1996 there was no place where a sustainable pattern of large-scale growth and development was evident, it is now understood clearly how such a pattern works; if the efforts demonstrated in the most advanced clusters are replicated in the five thousand where work is under way, they would easily encompass five million people and more. With this knowledge in hand and the assurance of much more learning to come, the Bahá'í world can confidently commit itself to the tasks in the present Plan and those that lie immediately ahead, which will take us to the end of the second Bahá'í century. Against the backdrop of the forces of disintegration and integration shaping the destiny of humanity, the Faith is destined in the uncharted decades ahead to experience the fruition of the great stages of growth set out by Shoghi Effendi at the start of the Ten Year Crusade:

Such a steady flow of reinforcements is absolutely vital and is of extreme urgency, for nothing short of the vitalizing influx of new blood that will reanimate the world Bahá'í community can safeguard the prizes which, at so great a sacrifice involving the expenditure of so much time, effort and treasure, are now being won in virgin territories by Baha'u'llah's valiant Knights, whose privilege is to constitute the spearhead of the onrushing battalions which, in diverse theaters and in circumstances often adverse and extremely challenging, are vying with each other for the spiritual conquest of the unsundered territories and islands on the surface of the globe.

This flow, moreover, will presage and hasten the advent of the day which, as prophesied by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, will witness the entry by troops of peoples of diverse nations and races into the Bahá'í world—a day which, viewed in its proper perspective, will be the prelude to that long-awaited hour when a mass conversion on the part of these same nations and races, and as a direct result of a chain of events, momentous and possibly catastrophic in nature, and which cannot as yet be even dimly visualized, will suddenly revolutionize the fortunes of the Faith, derange the equilibrium of the world, and reinforce a thousandfold the numerical strength as well as the material power and the spiritual authority of the Faith of Baha'u'llah.

A century has now passed since 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the Tablets of the Divine Plan. How much the Bahá'í world has grown in size, complexity, and capacity since a handful of immortal souls took the first steps to transform His vision into reality! We are the heirs and trustees of this priceless Divine Charter whose execution now depends upon our understanding and action in the years to come—years that will surely be marked by crisis and victory. In various passages He implored His loved ones: “Now you must become heavenly farmers and scatter pure seeds in the prepared soil. The harvest of every other seed is limited, but the bounty and the blessing of the seed of the Divine Teachings is unlimited. Throughout the coming centuries and cycles many harvests will be gathered . . . [O]ne grain will become seven hundred; and if God so wills He will double these also.” “Behold the portals which Baha'u'llah hath opened before you! Consider how exalted and lofty is the station you are destined to attain, how unique the favors with which you have been endowed.” “I fervently hope that in the near future the whole earth

may be stirred and shaken by the results of your achievements.” “O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of ‘Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá’ in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the Divine Teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.”

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PART 1

Selected Messages of the Universal House of Justice

27 December 2005

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

Over the past four and a half years, as the believers throughout the world have striven to pursue the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, it has become increasingly clear that the close of the present Five Year Plan will mark a decisive moment in the unfoldment of the historical enterprise on which the community of the Greatest Name is embarked. The elements required for a concerted effort to infuse the diverse regions of the world with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation have crystallized into a framework for action that now needs only to be exploited.

Our 26 December 1995 message, which focused the Bahá'í world on a path of intense learning about the sustained, rapid growth of the Faith, described in general terms the nature of the work that would have to be undertaken in meeting the challenges ahead. As a first step, Bahá'í communities were urged to systematize their efforts to develop the human resources of the Cause through a network of training institutes. While every national community took measures to create institutional capacity to perform this essential function, it was not until the outset of the Five Year Plan that the significance of a well-conceived program of training became widely appreciated. The introduction of the concept of the cluster made it possible for the friends to think about the accelerated growth of the community on a manageable scale and to conceive of it in terms of two complementary, reinforcing movements: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of institute courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of development to the next. This image helped the believers to analyze the lessons being learned in the field and to employ a common vocabulary to articulate their findings. Never before have the means for establishing a pattern of activity that places equal emphasis on the twin processes of expansion and consolidation been better understood. Indeed, so consistent has been the experience with intensive programs of growth, implemented on the basis of this understanding in diverse clusters, that no cause for equivocation remains. The way forward is clear, and at Ridván 2006 we will call upon the believers to steel their resolve and to proceed with the full force of their energies on the course that has been so decidedly set.

In presenting to you the features of the coming Five Year Plan, the subject of your deliberations in this conference, we will review the record of recent accomplishments of the Bahá'í world and indicate how current approaches, methods and instruments should be carried to this next stage. What the analysis will make evident is that the wholehearted response of the individual believer, the community and the institutions to the guidance they received five years ago has raised their capacity to new levels. The continued development of this capacity will remain essential to the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops—the focus of the Bahá'í world through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age.

The Individual

There is little need to describe in detail the achievements of the individual believer, for we have already noted these in our message of 17 January 2003 to the Bahá'ís of the world. In that message we highlighted the growing sense of initiative and resourcefulness, as well as the courage and audacity, that have come to characterize believers everywhere. Qualities such as consecration, zeal, confidence and tenacity attest to the enhanced vitality of their faith. We have also acknowledged the role played by the training institute in evoking the spirit of enterprise underlying the rise in activity observed around the world—the concrete expression of that vitality.

Developments since then have served only to demonstrate further the efficacy of a sequence of courses that seeks to build capacity for service by concentrating on the application of the spiritual insights gained through profound study of the Writings. Participants are exposed to a body of knowledge that fosters a set of related habits, attitudes and qualities and are assisted in sharpening certain skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service. Discussions that revolve around the Creative Word, in the serious and uplifting atmosphere of a study circle, raise the level of consciousness about one's duties to the Cause and create an awareness of the joy one derives from teaching the Faith and serving its interests. The spiritual context in which specific deeds are addressed endows them with significance. Confidence is patiently built as the friends engage in progressively more complex and demanding acts of service. Yet, above all, it is reliance on God that sustains them in their endeavors. How abundant the accounts of believers who enter the teaching field with trepidation only to find themselves bolstered by confirmations on all sides. Seeing the possibilities and opportunities before them with new eyes, they witness first hand the power of Divine assistance, as they strive to put into practice what they are learning and achieve results far exceeding their expectations. That the spirit of faith born out of intimate contact with the Word of God has such an effect on souls is by no means a new phenomenon. What is heartening is that the institute process is helping such large numbers experience the transforming potency of the Faith. To extend this edifying influence to hundreds of thousands more should be the object of intense effort over the next five years.

A discernible outcome of the emphasis on capacity building has been a steady increase in the exercise of individual initiative—initiative that is disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops. Endeavors are pursued in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan. As a result, activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement, and the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach is avoided. Commitment to long-term action grows, putting in context the initiatives undertaken by the believers at any particular moment.

Nowhere has the rise in individual initiative been more clearly demonstrated than in the field of teaching. Whether in the form of firesides or study circles, individual efforts to teach the Faith are indisputably on the increase. Equipped with skills and methods, effective and accessible to all, and encouraged by the response their actions elicit, the believers are entering into closer association with people of many walks of life, engaging them in earnest conversation on themes of spiritual import. With greater and greater spiritual perception, they are able to sense receptivity and recognize thirst for the vivifying waters of Bahá'u'lláh's message. From among all those they encounter—parents of neighborhood children, peers at school, colleagues at work, casual acquaintances—they seek out souls with whom they can share a portion of that which He has so graciously bestowed on humanity. Increased experience enables them to adapt their presentation to the seeker's needs, employing direct

teaching methods that draw on the Writings to offer the message in a manner both forthcoming and inviting.

Most noteworthy in this regard is the spirit of initiative shown by believers who extend the range of their endeavors to assist others also striving to tread a path of service. Having acquired the capacity to serve as tutors of institute courses, they take up the challenge of accompanying participants in their initial attempts to perform acts of service until they, too, are ready to start their own study circles and help others do the same, widening in this way the scope of the institute's influence and bringing eager souls into contact with the Word of God. This particular aspect of the institute process, which serves to multiply the number of active supporters of the Faith in a self-perpetuating manner, holds much promise, and we hope that its potential will be realized in the coming Plan. "Let him not be content," are the words of the Guardian referring to every teacher of the Cause, "until he has infused into his spiritual child so deep a longing as to impel him to arise independently, in his turn, and devote his energies to the quickening of other souls, and the upholding of the laws and principles laid down by his newly adopted Faith."

The Community

The enhanced vitality that distinguishes the life of the individual believer is equally evident in Bahá'í community life. The degree to which this vitality manifests itself depends, of course, on the stage of development of the cluster. A cluster in an advanced stage of growth offers far greater insight into what can be achieved than one in an earlier stage, where the friends are still struggling to translate the provisions of the Plan into action. It is to these more advanced clusters, then, that we must look in analyzing the accomplishments of the community, convinced that their experience will be emulated by others as they continue to progress.

On several occasions we have made reference to the coherence that is brought to the process of growth through the establishment of study circles, devotional meetings and children's classes. The steady multiplication of core activities, propelled by the training institute, creates a sustainable pattern of expansion and consolidation that is at once structured and organic. As seekers join these activities and declare their faith, individual and collective teaching endeavors gather momentum. Through the effort made to ensure that a percentage of the new believers enroll in the institute courses, the pool of human resources required to carry out the work of the Faith swells. When strenuously pursued in a cluster, all of this activity eventually brings about conditions favorable for launching an intensive program of growth.

What a close examination of clusters at this threshold confirms is that the coherence thus achieved extends to various aspects of community life. The study and application of the teachings become a pervasive habit, and the spirit of communal worship generated by devotional meetings begins to permeate the community's collective endeavors. A graceful integration of the arts into diverse activities enhances the surge of energy that mobilizes the believers. Classes for the spiritual education of children and junior youth serve to strengthen the roots of the Faith in the local population. Even an act of service as simple as visiting the home of a new believer, whether in a village in the Pacific Islands or in a vast metropolitan area like London, reinforces ties of fellowship that bind the members of the community together. Conceived as a means for exposing believers to the fundamentals of the Faith, "home visits" are giving rise to an array of deepening efforts, both individual and collective, in which the friends are delving into the Writings and exploring their implications for their lives.

As the spiritual foundations of the community are fortified in this way, the level of collective discourse is raised, social relations among the friends take on new meaning, and a sense of common purpose inspires their interactions. Little wonder, then, that a study carried out by the International Teaching Centre shows that, in some fifty advanced clusters surveyed, the quality of the Nineteen Day Feast has improved. Other reports indicate that contributions to the Fund have increased as -consciousness of its spiritual significance expands and the need for material means is better understood. Reflection meetings at the cluster level are becoming a forum for the discussion of needs and plans, creating a collective identity and strengthening the collective will. Where such advanced clusters are flourishing, the influence they exert begins to spread beyond their own borders to enrich regional events, such as summer and winter schools.

As in the case of the individual, learning is the hallmark of this phase of the development of the community. You and your auxiliaries are urged to exert every effort in the coming years to ensure that, in cluster after cluster, learning is woven into the fabric of decision-making.

One of your primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize.

By the same token, desire and willingness to open certain aspects of community life to the wider public should be integrated into a pattern of behavior that attracts souls and confirms them. Much has been achieved in this respect as the friends have adopted new ways of thinking and acting at a collective level. In welcoming large numbers into its embrace, the community is learning to see more readily the latent potentiality in people and to avoid setting artificial barriers for them based on preconceived notions. A nurturing environment is being cultivated in which each individual is encouraged to progress at his or her own pace without the pressure of unreasonable expectations. At the heart of such developments is a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity. Most gratifying are the endeavors being made to reach receptive populations with the teachings of the Faith. As unrelenting social and political forces continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents, an uncompromising appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds and for the strength it confers on the whole will prove crucial to the expansion and consolidation of the community.

Perhaps the task that will occupy the attention of you and your auxiliaries above all others is to assist the community in its effort to maintain focus. This ability, slowly acquired through successive Plans, represents one of its most valuable assets, hard won through discipline, commitment and foresight as the friends and their institutions have learned to pursue the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. On the one hand, you will find it necessary to discourage the tendency to confuse focus with uniformity or exclusivity. To maintain focus does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others. Clearly, there are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed. On the other hand, you will want to take every opportunity to reinforce the disposition to prioritize—one which recognizes that not all activities have the same

importance at a given stage of growth, that some must necessarily take precedence over others, that even the most well-intentioned proposals can cause distraction, dissipate energy or impede progress. What should be plainly acknowledged is that the time available for the friends to serve the Faith in every community is not without limits. It is only natural to expect that the preponderating share of this limited resource would be expended in meeting the provisions of the Plan.

The Institutions

None of the accomplishments of the individual or the community could be sustained without the guidance, encouragement and support of the third participant in the Plan—the institutions of the Faith. It is heartening to see to what extent the institutions are promoting individual initiative, channeling energies into the teaching field, underscoring the value of systematic action, fostering the spiritual life of the community and nurturing a welcoming environment. In helping the community to remain focused on the aim of the Plan, they are learning in practical terms what it means to maintain unity of vision among the friends, to put mechanisms in place that facilitate their endeavors and to allocate resources in accordance with priorities wisely set. These priorities include, of course, areas of activity that require the specialized skills of individuals. Worthy of particular mention in this category are the work of external affairs, which National Spiritual Assemblies are following diligently, and ventures of social and economic development, as, for example, undertaken by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. While tending to needs of this kind, the institutions find themselves increasingly capable of directing the thrust of the effort exerted by the generality of the believers towards the prosecution of the central tasks of the Plan.

Encouraging, too, are the determined steps being taken by National Spiritual Assemblies, in collaboration with the Counsellors, to respond to the administrative challenges brought by large-scale growth at the cluster level. Schemes that are emerging tend to call for one or more individuals named by the training institute to coordinate the delivery of courses in the main sequence, as well as programs for children and junior youth. An Area Teaching Committee appointed by the Regional Council, or by the National Assembly itself, is also required to administer other aspects of systematic effort to achieve accelerated expansion and consolidation. Auxiliary Board members work on both fronts to ensure that the two movements which have come to characterize the process of growth proceed unhampered. While these various components are being established in cluster after cluster, there is still much to be learned about the functions each is to perform and about the relationships among them. What is important is that the current degree of flexibility, which allows for the creation of new instruments as needed, not be compromised so that the scheme of coordination represents a response to the demands of growth itself. We count on you and National Assemblies to guide this learning process.

Throughout the Plan, we have watched with the keenest interest the effects of these developments on the functioning of Local Spiritual Assemblies. It gives us pleasure to note that two types of progress are being made in this respect. In those clusters where most of the Local Assemblies have been extremely weak, a growing number are gradually assuming their responsibilities as they learn to guide specific activities of the Plan in the areas under their jurisdiction. At the same time, long-standing Local Spiritual Assemblies are exhibiting signs of added strength as they have come to embrace a vision of systematic growth—this, often following a period of adjustment in which some struggled to understand the new realities being created at the cluster level.

What has brought us particular joy is to see that the process of growth unfolding around the world is gathering momentum in urban centers as well as rural areas. An important step taken in many large cities early in the current Plan was to divide them into sectors. This proved crucial to planning for sustained growth. As communities expand, however, it is not unreasonable to expect that cities will need to be divided into smaller areas—perhaps ultimately into neighborhoods—in each of which the Nineteen Day Feast is conducted. Maintaining a vision of the potential size of future communities is essential for the further development of Local Assemblies. To administer the affairs of communities whose membership will swell into the thousands, and to fulfill their purpose as the “trusted ones of the Merciful among men,” those who serve on Spiritual Assemblies will necessarily undergo intense periods of learning in the years ahead. We intend to monitor the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies closely during the coming Plan and, as the size of the Bahá’í population and other circumstances in a locality demand, authorize a two-stage electoral process on a case-by-case basis, following the pattern developed in Tíhrán during the ministry of the Guardian.

Intensive Programs of Growth

Sustained endeavor on the part of the individual, the community and the institutions to accelerate the institute process in a cluster, while contributing to its movement from one stage of development to another through well-proven means, culminates in the launching of an intensive program of growth. Indeed, the most significant advances in learning during the present Plan resulted from efforts in some two hundred clusters to implement such programs. We are convinced that this learning can now be systematically propagated in every continent, and at Ridván 2006 we will call upon Bahá’ís worldwide to establish, during the next Plan, intensive programs of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters.

As currently conceived, an intensive program of growth is straightforward, simple and effective, but implies a level of exertion that tests the resolve of the friends. Conforming well to the vision we presented five years ago, it employs a few measures that have proven to be indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation. It consists of cycles of activity, in general of three months’ duration each, which proceed according to distinct phases of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning.

The expansion phase, often a period of two weeks, demands the highest level of intensity. Its objective is to widen the circle of those interested in the Faith, to find receptive souls and to teach them. Although this phase might include some element of proclamation, it should not be seen as a time to hold a few events for this purpose or to undertake a set of activities that merely convey information. Experience suggests that the more closely teaching approaches and methods are aligned with the capacity acquired from the study of the institute courses the more rewarding the results.

Plans being devised for this phase invariably involve the implementation of carefully designed teaching projects and campaigns of home visits and firesides, often through the mobilization of teaching teams. The pattern of expansion that unfolds, however, varies from cluster to cluster. Where the population has traditionally shown a high degree of receptivity to the Faith, a rapid influx of new believers is to be expected. In one cluster of this kind, for example, the goal of enrolling fifty souls over a three-week period in a locality was surpassed by the second day, and the team wisely decided to end the expansion phase in anticipation of activities related to consolidation. One of the primary objectives of this next phase is to bring a percentage of the new believers into the institute process so that an adequate pool of human resources will be available in future cycles to sustain growth. Those not participating in study circles are nurtured through a series of home visits, and all are invited to devotional meetings, to the

celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast and to Holy Day observances and are gradually introduced to the patterns of community life. Not infrequently, the consolidation phase gives rise to further enrollments as the family members and friends of new declarants accept the Faith.

In other clusters, enrollments during the expansion phase may not be high, especially in the first few cycles, and the goal is to augment the number of those willing to participate in core activities. This, then, defines the nature of the consolidation phase, which largely involves nurturing the interest of seekers and accompanying them in their spiritual search until they are confirmed in their faith. To the extent that these measures are vigorously followed, this phase can generate a considerable number of enrollments. It should be noted, however, that as learning advances and experience is gained, the ability not only to teach responsive souls, but also to identify segments of the general population with heightened receptivity, develops, and the totality of new believers increases from cycle to cycle.

Whatever the nature of the cluster, it is imperative to pay close attention to children and junior youth everywhere. Concern for the moral and spiritual education of young people is asserting itself forcefully on the consciousness of humanity, and no attempt at community building can afford to ignore it. What has become especially apparent during the current Five Year Plan is the efficacy of educational programs aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. When accompanied for three years through a program that enhances their spiritual perception, and encouraged to enter the main sequence of institute courses at the age of fifteen, they represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization. So impressed are we by the results already achieved, and so compelling is the need, that we will urge all National Assemblies to consider the junior youth groups formed through programs implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

Key to the progress of an intensive program of growth is the phase dedicated to reflection, in which the lessons learned in action are articulated and incorporated into plans for the next cycle of activity. Its principal feature is the reflection meeting—as much a time of joyous celebration as it is of serious consultation. Careful analysis of experience, through participatory discussions rather than overly complex and elaborate presentations, serves to maintain unity of vision, sharpen clarity of thought and heighten enthusiasm. Central to such an analysis is the review of vital statistics that suggest the next set of goals to be adopted. Plans are made that take into account increased capacity in terms of the human resources available at the end of the cycle to perform various tasks, on the one hand, and accumulated knowledge about the receptivity of the population and the dynamics of teaching, on the other. When human resources increase in a manner proportionate to the rise in the overall Bahá'í population from cycle to cycle, it is possible not only to sustain but to accelerate growth.

To meet the ambitious goal of establishing 1,500 such intensive programs, the Bahá'í world will have to draw fully upon the experience gained and capacity built over the past ten years. Following your departure from the Holy Land, you will need to enter into thorough consultation with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils and together carefully assess conditions in each national community in order to identify the clusters that will receive focused attention and to map out strategic plans.

Implementation of these plans should begin as soon as possible after Ridván 2006. Experience in advancing the movement of clusters from one stage to the next is now so widespread that the methods and instruments are well understood. The institute process must be strengthened so that a sizeable

number of friends proceed through the main sequence of courses. Intensive institute campaigns that pay adequate attention to the practice component will be essential in this respect. The number of core activities should be steadily multiplied, and outreach to the wider community systematically extended. Meetings of reflection will have to be held periodically in order to monitor progress, maintain unity of thought and mobilize the energies of the friends. And schemes for administering the growth process should gradually be put in place, as circumstances demand. While capacity at the level of the cluster to sustain growth will remain the most compelling concern in the coming years, the ongoing development of regional and national structures to facilitate the flow of information and resources to and from the field of action cannot be neglected.

Equally important will be the support lent to a cluster through an influx of pioneers. The desire to pioneer arises naturally from deep within the heart of the individual believer as a response to the Divine summons. Whosoever forsakes his or her home for the purpose of teaching the Cause joins the ranks of those noble souls whose achievements down the decades have illumined the annals of Bahá'í pioneering. We cherish the hope that many will be moved to render this meritorious service during the next Plan, whether on the home front or in the international field—an act that, in itself, attracts untold blessings. The institutions, in turn, will have to exercise sound judgment to ensure that such friends are strategically placed. Priority should be given to settling short-term and long-term pioneers in those clusters that are the focus of systematic attention, whether as a means of reinforcing endeavors to lay the groundwork for accelerated growth or stabilizing cycles of activity under way. It is not unreasonable to assume that a concerted effort to build on strength will result in the eventual outflow of pioneers from such clusters to areas destined to become the theatre of future conquests.

Dear Friends: In the weeks and months ahead and over the course of the Plan, you and your auxiliaries will be a constant source of encouragement to the believers as they rise to the challenge being presented to them. We ask that you take every opportunity to convey to them our confidence in their capacity to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably appear in their path. They should not fail to recognize the scope of what they have achieved through the sustaining grace of Bahá'u'lláh over the past decade. In the course of the first four years, they created the institutional capacity throughout the planet to impart spiritual education to growing contingents of believers. Building on this accomplishment, they engaged in a rigorous process of learning that opened before their eyes vistas of great yet attainable possibilities. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in multiplying the number of devotional meetings sixfold over the past five years, that classes for children and junior youth have increased more than threefold during the same period, that the number of study circles worldwide has surpassed eleven thousand—these provide a measure of the extraordinary strength the believers can draw upon in shouldering the responsibility entrusted to them.

Above all, the friends need to remain ever conscious of the magnitude of the spiritual forces that are at their disposition. They are members of a community “whose world-embracing, continually consolidating activities constitute the one integrating process in a world whose institutions, secular as well as religious, are for the most part dissolving.” Of all the peoples of the world, “they alone can recognize, amidst the welter of a tempestuous age, the Hand of the Divine Redeemer that traces its course and controls its destinies. They alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity whose fabric they themselves are weaving.” It is their institutions that “will come to be regarded as the hallmark and glory of the age” they have been called upon to establish. The “building process,” to which they are consecrated, is “the one hope of a stricken society.” For, it is “actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative

Order of His Faith.” And remind them that they are the illumined souls envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His prayer: “Heroes are they, O my Lord, lead them to the field of battle. Guides are they, make them to speak out with arguments and proofs. Ministering servants are they, cause them to pass round the cup that brimmeth with the wine of certitude. O my God, make them to be songsters that carol in fair gardens, make them lions that couch in the thickets, whales that plunge in the vasty deep.”

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

28 December 2005

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In the coming weeks you will be engaged in consultations on the features of the next Five Year Plan as described in our message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. We feel that these deliberations will benefit from the following comments regarding the curriculum of the training institute.

When in our message dated 26 December 1995 we underscored the need for a formal program of training, we were aware that certain elements of a curriculum meeting the necessary requirements existed in the materials of the Ruhi Institute. It was our conviction, however, that the accumulated experience at that point did not justify our recommending a specific set of materials to be used by training institutes throughout the world. Therefore, the messages written by us and on our behalf in the early part of the Four Year Plan encouraged National Spiritual Assemblies and the Counsellors to open the way for training institutes to follow whatever curriculum they deemed appropriate. Yet, conscious of the inherent difficulty in creating comprehensive programs, we repeatedly expressed the view that the execution of plans should not await protracted decisions on the question of curriculum and that materials readily available should be used. The availability of such materials was limited worldwide, and National Spiritual Assemblies and institute boards began to adopt the books of the Ruhi Institute as they became aware of them, often through the Counsellors. By the time the Four Year Plan came to a close, it was all too apparent that national communities which had vigorously set out to implement the sequence of courses designed by the Ruhi Institute were far ahead of those who had attempted to develop their own program.

It was the Five Year Plan, however, that served to convince Counsellors, National Assemblies and boards everywhere of the merits of the Ruhi Institute curriculum. The introduction of the seventh book in the Institute's main sequence at the start of the Plan enabled many to appreciate more the intimate connection between the flow of individuals through a sequence of courses and the movement of clusters from one stage of growth to the next. Indeed, as progress was achieved in hundreds of clusters, it became clear to institutions at all levels that the content and order of the main sequence prepared the friends to carry out those acts of service required by the pattern of growth being established in a cluster. We have, in fact, described the dynamics of this relationship in our message of 27 December 2005.

We have now familiarized ourselves with the Ruhi Institute's present plans for curriculum development, which increasingly draw on experience worldwide in sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. We welcome the decision of the Institute, for example, to move the book currently occupying the fifth position in the sequence to a set of courses branching out from Book 3 for preparing Bahá'í children's class teachers and to insert in the fifth place a new book for raising up animators of junior youth groups. That the eighth book in the main sequence, initiating a series concerned with the

institutional aspects of service to the Cause, will address the all-important question of the Covenant is noted with equal pleasure. With these thoughts in mind, we have reached the conclusion that the books of the Ruhi Institute should constitute the main sequence of courses for institutes everywhere, at least through the final years of the first century of the Formative Age when the Bahá'í community will be focused on advancing the process of entry by troops within the framework for action set forth in our 27 December message.

To select one curriculum to be used by training institutes worldwide for a certain period of time is not to ignore the variety of needs and interests of the friends as they endeavor to better equip themselves to understand and apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Nor does it in any way diminish the value of the efforts made to develop courses and materials to respond to these needs. It is not intended to suggest, either, that one curriculum should necessarily appeal to everyone. What this decision does imply, however, is that the present demands of the growth of the Faith are such that, for some years to come, training institutes should not attempt to meet all of the needs and interests of the friends.

The institutions of the Faith will continue to respect the wishes of those who, for whatever reason, do not feel inclined to participate in the study of the books of the Ruhi Institute. Those not so disposed should recognize that there are many avenues of service open to them, including, above all, individual teaching which is the paramount duty of every Bahá'í. Local deepening classes and summer and winter schools, which remain an important feature of Bahá'í community life, will provide ample opportunities for them to deepen their knowledge of the teachings. What we ask of such friends, as we have in the past, is that they not allow their personal preferences to hamper in any way the unfoldment of an educational process that has shown the potential to embrace millions of souls from diverse backgrounds. Regarding the materials that have been developed in other contexts over the years, and which will continue to emerge, these surely have their proper place in the Bahá'í community. Some, for example, form the basis for deepening classes at the grassroots, while others, with the necessary modifications, can be situated along one of the branches of courses stemming out from the Ruhi Institute's main sequence.

In this connection, we feel that the subject of branch courses deserves a few words of explanation. In our message dated 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, we indicated that the main sequence could be likened to the trunk of a tree, which supports other courses branching out from it, each branch addressing some specific area of action. A set of health materials being developed in Africa offers a good illustration of a few features of such courses. Following years of training community health workers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, several Bahá'í agencies decided to elaborate a series of modules aimed at preparing individuals to deal with progressively more complex health issues at the local level. By the time the first module began to be used in its initial form, the institute process had gained in strength, and it became evident that those who had studied Books 1 and 2 of the Ruhi Institute were better prepared to visit members of their extended families and friends and speak on health-related subjects. The design of the modules was modified so that they could constitute a branch after Book 2, which participants study while they continue along in the main sequence. Efforts in this direction have met with definite success. This example illustrates that branch courses are not a disconnected collection of materials randomly placed at various points. Rather, they must emerge out of actual experience and adhere to a certain logic, both internally and in the context of the overall institute program, if they are to be pedagogically sound. Further, the very concept of a branch course suggests that it provides training for an area of service which will interest only some of those who are studying the books of the main sequence. We hope that the development of such courses

to address specific needs, defined by action on the ground, will be a natural consequence of the endeavors of burgeoning communities which are avidly striving to translate into reality the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to use training materials as a means of systematizing their experience and sharing with increasing numbers the insights they gain.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

31 December 2005

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

As the gathering of the Continental Counsellors in the Holy Land draws to a close, we are moved to share with you the feelings of joy, triumph and confidence which have characterized several days of focused deliberation on the present Five Year Plan and on the global enterprise that will succeed it.

The Hand of the Cause of God 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá opened the conference with a stirring appeal for resolute action, infusing the proceedings with a spirit of unwavering determination. Stories poured forth of the inspiring activities of the friends and the longing and responsiveness of the peoples of the world, conveying assurances that the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is blossoming more abundantly in all parts of the globe. Persistent questions of how to sustain the process of growth, of how to achieve a balance between expansion and consolidation, that have engaged the Bahá'í community for nearly half a century found clear answers in the experiences shared from diverse clusters on all continents. Accounts of obstacles surmounted, fresh learning acquired, and creative insights discovered made it evident that the Army of Light is prepared to advance towards new horizons.

There can be no doubt that the Plan soon to end marks an upturn in the fortunes of the Faith. We look to the next decade and a half, the final years of the first century of the Formative Age, with great expectations of what will be accomplished. From this vantage point, the Bahá'í world can readily appreciate the significant extent to which the International Teaching Centre provided the impetus so indispensable to blazing the course set over these past few years and can, as well, discern the rich possibilities that its consecrated endeavors portend for the future.

Our message of 27 December addressed to the conference, which has already been transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies, summarizes the learning about growth to date and delineates the priorities for the next Plan. Careful study of the message by all believers and institutions will be an essential requisite for the upcoming consultations that will take place at every level of the community upon the return home of the Counsellors.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Ridván 2006

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Ridván 2006 is a moment charged with a spirit of triumph and anticipation. The followers of Bahá'u'lláh everywhere can take rightful pride in the magnitude of their accomplishments during the Five Year Plan now drawing to a close. And towards the future they can look with a confidence that is conferred only on those whose resolve is steeled through experience. The entire Bahá'í world is stirred at contemplating the scope of the five-year enterprise that lies ahead, the depth of consecration it will demand, and the results it is destined to achieve. Our prayers join yours as you turn in gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the privilege of witnessing the unfoldment of His purpose for humanity.

In our message of 27 December 2005 to the Counsellors gathered in the Holy Land, transmitted on that same day to all National Spiritual Assemblies, we delineated the features of the Five Year Plan that will stretch from 2006 to 2011. The friends and their institutions were urged to study the message thoroughly, and its content is no doubt well familiar to you. We now call upon each and every one of you to bend your energies towards ensuring that the goal of establishing over the next five years intensive programs of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide is successfully met. That in the months following the Counsellors' departure from the World Centre the groundwork for the Plan's launch was laid so rapidly and systematically in country after country is an indication of the eagerness with which the Bahá'í community is taking up the challenge presented to it. While there is no need for us to elaborate further on the requirements of the Plan here, we feel compelled to offer for your reflection a few comments on the global context in which your individual and collective efforts will be pursued.

More than seventy years ago Shoghi Effendi penned his World Order letters in which he provided a penetrating analysis of the forces operating in the world. With an eloquence that was his alone, he described two great processes that have been set in motion by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, one destructive and the other integrative, both of which are propelling humanity towards the World Order He conceived. We were cautioned by the Guardian not to be "misled by the painful slowness characterizing the unfoldment of the civilization" being laboriously established or to be "deluded by the ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity which at times appear to be capable of checking the disruptive influence of the chronic ills afflicting the institutions of a decaying age." No review of the course of events in recent decades can fail to acknowledge the gathering momentum of the processes he analyzed then with such precision.

One need only consider the deepening moral crisis engulfing humanity to appreciate the extent to which the forces of disintegration have rent the fabric of society. Have not the evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear and of fraud, which the Guardian perceived with such clarity, become so widespread as to be readily apparent to even the casual observer? Does not the threat of terrorism of which he spoke loom so large on the international scene as to preoccupy the minds of young and old

alike in every corner of the globe? Have not the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches and pleasures so consolidated their power and influence as to assume authority over such human values as happiness, fidelity and love? Have not the weakening of family solidarity and the irresponsible attitude towards marriage reached such proportions as to endanger the existence of this fundamental unit of society? “The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct, the corruption and dissolution of human institutions,” about which Shoghi Effendi forewarned, are sadly revealing themselves “in their worst and most revolting aspects.”

The Guardian lays the greatest share of the blame for humanity’s moral downfall on the decline of religion as a social force. “Should the lamp of religion be obscured,” he draws our attention to the words of Bahá’u’lláh, “chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness, of justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.” The decades that followed the writing of his letters have seen not only a continued deterioration in the ability of religion to exercise moral influence, but also the betrayal of the masses through the unseemly conduct of religious institutions. Attempts at reinvigorating it have only given rise to a fanaticism that, if left unchecked, could destroy the foundation of civilized relationships among people. The persecution of the Bahá’ís in Iran, recently intensified, is ample evidence alone of the determination of the forces of darkness to quench the flame of faith wherever it burns brightly. Though confident in the ultimate triumph of the Cause, we dare not forget the warning of the Guardian that the Faith will have to contend with enemies more powerful and more insidious than those who have afflicted it in the past.

There is no need to comment extensively on the impotence of statesmanship, another theme treated so masterfully by the Guardian in his World Order letters. The widening economic divide between the rich and the poor, the persistence of age-old animosities among nations, the swelling numbers of the displaced, the extraordinary rise in organized crime and violence, the pervasive sense of insecurity, the breakdown of basic services in so many regions, the indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources—these are but a few of the signs of the inability of world leaders to devise viable schemes to alleviate humanity’s ills. This is not to say that sincere efforts have not been exerted, in fact, have not multiplied decade after decade. Yet these efforts, no matter how ingenious, fall well short of removing “the root cause of the evil that has so rudely upset the equilibrium of present-day society.” “Not even,” the Guardian asserted, “would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world . . . provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigor of organized peoples and nations.” “What else,” he confidently affirmed, “but the unreserved acceptance of the Divine Program” enunciated by Bahá’u’lláh, “embodying in its essentials God’s divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age, coupled with an indomitable conviction in the unfailing efficacy of each and all of its provisions, is eventually capable of withstanding the forces of internal disintegration which, if unchecked, must needs continue to eat into the vitals of a despairing society.”

Penetrating, indeed, is Shoghi Effendi’s depiction of the process of disintegration accelerating in the world. Equally striking is the accuracy with which he analyzed the forces associated with the process of integration. He spoke of a “gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society” as an indirect manifestation of Bahá’u’lláh’s conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind. This spirit of solidarity has continued to spread over the decades, and today its effect is apparent in a range of developments, from the rejection of deeply ingrained racial prejudices to the dawning consciousness of world citizenship, from heightened environmental awareness to collaborative efforts in the promotion of public health, from

the concern for human rights to the systematic pursuit of universal education, from the establishment of interfaith activities to the efflorescence of hundreds of thousands of local, national and international organizations engaged in some form of social action.

Yet for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh the most significant developments in the process of integration are those directly related to the Faith, many of which were nurtured by the Guardian himself and which have advanced tremendously since their modest beginnings. From the small nucleus of believers to whom he imparted his first teaching plans has grown a worldwide community with a presence in thousands of localities, each following a well-established pattern of activity that embodies the Faith's principles and aspirations. Upon the foundation of the Administrative Order he so painstakingly laid during the early decades of his ministry has been raised a large, closely knit network of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies diligently administering the affairs of the Cause in more than one hundred and eighty countries. From the first contingents of Auxiliary Board members for the Protection and Propagation of the Faith brought into being by him has arisen a legion of nearly one thousand stalwart workers serving in the field under the direction of eighty-one Counsellors ably guided by the International Teaching Centre. The evolution of the World Administrative Center of the Faith, within the precincts of its World Spiritual Center, a process to which the Guardian consecrated so much energy, has crossed a crucial threshold with the occupation by the Universal House of Justice of its Seat on Mount Carmel and the subsequent completion of the International Teaching Centre Building and the Centre for the Study of the Texts. The Institution of Huqúqu'lláh has steadily progressed under the stewardship of the Hand of the Cause of God Dr. 'Alí-Muhammad Varqá, appointed Trustee by Shoghi Effendi fifty years ago, culminating in the establishment in 2005 of an international board designed to promote the continued widespread application of this mighty law, a source of inestimable blessings for all humanity. The efforts of the Guardian to raise the profile of the Faith in international circles have developed into an extensive external affairs system, capable of both defending the interests of the Faith and proclaiming its universal message. The respect the Faith enjoys in international fora, whenever its representatives speak, is a most noteworthy accomplishment. The loyalty and devotion that the members of a community reflecting the diversity of the entire human race evince towards the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh constitute a storehouse of strength the like of which no other organized group can claim.

The Guardian foresaw that, in succeeding epochs of the Formative Age, the Universal House of Justice would launch a series of worldwide enterprises which would "symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities" of National Spiritual Assemblies. Over the course of three successive epochs now, the Bahá'í community has labored assiduously within the framework of the global Plans issued by the House of Justice and has succeeded in establishing a pattern of Bahá'í life that promotes the spiritual development of the individual and channels the collective energies of its members towards the spiritual revival of society. It has acquired the capacity to reach large numbers of receptive souls with the message, to confirm them, and to deepen their understanding of the essentials of the Faith they have embraced. It has learned to translate the principle of consultation enunciated by its Founder into an effective tool for collective decision-making and to educate its members in its use. It has devised programs for the spiritual and moral education of its younger members and has extended them not only to its own children and junior youth but also to those of the wider community. With the pool of talent at its disposition, it has created a rich body of literature which includes volumes in scores of languages that address both its own needs and the interest of the general public. It has become increasingly involved in the affairs of society at large, undertaking a host of projects of social and economic development. Particularly since the opening of the fifth epoch in 2001, it has made significant strides in multiplying its human resources through a program of training that reaches the

grassroots of the community and has discovered methods and instruments for establishing a sustainable pattern of growth.

It is in the context of the interplay of the forces described here that the imperative of advancing the process of entry by troops must be viewed. The Five Year Plan now opening requires that you concentrate your energies on this process and ensure that the two complementary movements at its heart are accelerated. This should be your dominant concern. As your efforts bear fruit and the dynamics of growth reach a new level of complexity, there will be challenges and opportunities for the World Centre itself to address in the coming five years in fields such as external affairs, social and economic development, administration, and the application of Bahá'í law. The growth of the community has already necessitated that new arrangements be put in place to double the number of pilgrims to four hundred in each group beginning in October 2007. There are several other projects that will also have to be pursued. Among these are the further development of the gardens surrounding the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, as well as the Ridván Garden and Mazra'ih; the restoration of the International Archives Building; structural repairs to the Shrine of the Báb, the full extent of which are not yet clear; and the construction of the House of Worship in Chile as envisioned by the Guardian, the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. As these endeavors advance, we will call on you from time to time for assistance, both in the form of financial support and specialized talents, mindful that the resources of the Faith should, to the greatest measure possible, be channeled to the requirements of the Plan.

Dear friends: That the forces of disintegration are gaining in range and power cannot be ignored. It is equally clear that the community of the Greatest Name has been guided from strength to strength by the Hand of Providence and must now increase in size and augment its resources. The course set by the Five Year Plan is straightforward. How can those of us aware of the plight of humanity, and conscious of the direction in which history is unfolding, not arise to the fullest of our capacity and dedicate ourselves to its aim? Do not the words of the Guardian that "the stage is set" hold as true for us today as they did when he wrote them during the first Seven Year Plan? Let his words ring in your ears: "There is no time to lose." "There is no room left for vacillation." "Such an opportunity is irreplaceable." "To try, to persevere, is to insure ultimate and complete victory." Be assured of our continued prayers at the Sacred Threshold for your guidance and protection.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

25 March 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

One of the signs of the breakdown of society in all parts of the world is the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the institutions of governance. In many nations the electoral process has become discredited because of endemic corruption. Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds, the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system, and the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media. Apathy, alienation, and disillusionment are a consequence, too, as is a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order. Evident everywhere is a yearning for institutions which will dispense justice, dispel oppression, and foster an enduring unity between the disparate elements of society.

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh is the divinely ordained system for which nations and peoples so desperately search. Hailed by the Báb in the Persian Bayan, its foundational features prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, this Order is without precedent in human history for its standard of justice and its commitment to the practical realization of the oneness of mankind, as well as for its capacity to promote change and the advancement of world civilization. It provides the means by which the Divine Will illumines the path of human progress and guides the eventual establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Throughout the entire planet the devoted followers of Bahá'u'lláh are labouring to develop further the Bahá'í Administrative Order described by the Guardian “not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order”, thus setting the foundation for a world civilization destined to yield its dazzling splendour in the centuries to come. They do so notwithstanding the conditions of turmoil and disorder alluded to by Bahá'u'lláh in affirming that “the world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind’s ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed.”

With the concerted worldwide endeavour to advance the process of entry by troops gathering momentum through implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan, it is now opportune that the believers everywhere give greater attention to strengthening the process by which Assemblies, national and local, are elected. The manner of participation by all adult members of the community in these elections is a distinguishing feature of the System of Bahá'u'lláh; for it is a bounden duty that confers a high privilege upon every Bahá'í to select, as a responsible citizen of the new world being brought into existence, the composition of the institutions having authority over the functioning of the Bahá'í community. In this regard, indifference and neglect on the part of any believer are alien to the spirit of the Cause. The friends must strive ceaselessly to avoid being contaminated with these

destructive attitudes, which have inflicted such damage on the integrity and authority of the institutions of a declining world order.

In describing Bahá'í elections, Shoghi Effendi, through a letter written on his behalf, conveyed that “Bahá'í electoral procedures and methods have, indeed, for one of their essential purposes the development in every believer of the spirit of responsibility. By emphasizing the necessity of maintaining his full freedom in the elections, they make it incumbent upon him to become an active and well-informed member of the Bahá'í community in which he lives.”

The manner in which the elector exercises the right and privilege to cast his vote is therefore of great significance. Shoghi Effendi's instruction in this passage further explains that “to be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all local activities, be they teaching, administrative or otherwise, and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá'í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station.”

While there should be no mention of personalities in connection with Bahá'í elections, it is quite appropriate for believers to discuss the requirements and qualifications for membership in the institution to be elected. Shoghi Effendi offers clear guidance on this point: “I feel that reference to personalities before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to exchange views, to mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals.” Among the “necessary qualities” specified by the Guardian are those “of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience”. With a heightened awareness of the functions to be performed by the elected body, the believer can properly assess those for whom a vote should be cast. From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender. The elector should make his choice after careful thought over an extended period before the actual election.

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. They should approach this duty in a prayerful attitude, seeking divine guidance and confirmation. As Shoghi Effendi has advised, “they must turn completely to God, and with a purity of motive, a freedom of spirit and a sanctity of heart, participate in the elections.”

Through their wholehearted embrace of the Bahá'í electoral process, the believers will witness, day by day, a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around them. In this increasing distinction will be seen the promise of the glory of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the System destined to fulfil the highest expectations of humanity.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Ridván 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The first year of the Five Year Plan bears eloquent testimony to the spirit of devotion with which Bahá'u'lláh's followers have embraced the framework for action presented in our message of 27 December 2005 and their commitment to advancing the process of entry by troops. Where this framework has been applied coherently in all its dimensions in a cluster, steady progress is being achieved, both in terms of the participation of the believers and their friends in community life and in terms of numerical growth, with some clusters reporting enrolments in the hundreds every few months and others in scores. Vital to this development has been a heightened awareness of the spiritual nature of the enterprise, together with an increased understanding of those decision-making instruments that are defined by the principal features of the Plan.

Prior to our launching the current series of global Plans focused on the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops, the Bahá'í community had passed through a stage of rapid, large-scale expansion in many parts of the world—an expansion which ultimately was impossible to sustain. The challenge, then, lay not so much in swelling the ranks of the Cause with new adherents, at least from populations of proven receptivity, but in incorporating them into the life of the community and raising up from among them adequate numbers dedicated to its further expansion. So crucial was it for the Bahá'í world to address this challenge that we made it a central feature of the Four Year Plan and called upon National Spiritual Assemblies to spend the greater part of their energies creating institutional capacity, in the form of the training institute, to develop human resources. Ever-increasing contingents of believers, we indicated, would need to benefit from a formal programme of training designed to endow them with the knowledge and spiritual insights, with the skills and abilities, required to carry out the acts of service that would sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation.

Today as we observe the workings of those clusters which are in a robust state of growth, we note that in every one of them the friends have continued to strengthen the institute process, while learning to mobilize their expanding nucleus of active supporters of the Faith, to establish an efficient scheme for the coordination of their efforts, to weave their individual initiatives and collective endeavours into an effective pattern of unified action, and to draw on the analysis of pertinent information in planning the cycles of their activities. That they have found the means for carrying forward the work of expansion and consolidation hand in hand—the key to sustained growth—is demonstrable. Such evidence will surely inspire every devoted believer to remain resolute on the path of systematic learning that has been set.

The accomplishments of these years of prodigious effort have not been confined to those clusters where the work of large-scale expansion and consolidation is being thus revitalized. The approach taken during the Four Year Plan, followed by the Twelve Month Plan and the previous Five Year Plan, proved instrumental in creating conditions for the believers to extend their endeavours to a wide circle of

people, engaging them in various aspects of community life. The benefits of the decade-long process of capacity building in the three participants of the global Plans are now broadly apparent. Everywhere there was a need to gain an understanding of the dynamics of human resource development. Everywhere the friends had to learn the requirements of steady growth—to promote systematic action and to avoid distractions, to bring certain elements of collective decision-making close to the grassroots and to create communities with a sense of mission, to encourage universal participation and to accommodate different segments of society in their activities, particularly children and junior youth, the future champions of the Cause of God and builders of His civilization.

With so firm a foundation in place, the foremost thought in the mind of each and every believer should be teaching. Whether in their personal efforts they teach their friends in firesides and then involve them in the core activities or use these activities as their primary instrument for teaching, whether as a community they make their work with children and junior youth the initial thrust in a cluster or focus first on the older generations, whether in their collective endeavours they visit families in teams as part of an intensive campaign or call on seekers in their homes periodically over time—these are decisions that can only be made according to the circumstances and possibilities of the friends and the nature of the populations with whom they interact. What all must acknowledge, irrespective of circumstance, are both the crying need of a humanity that, bereft of spiritual sustenance, is sinking deeper into despair and the urgency of the responsibility to teach with which we each have been entrusted as members of the community of the Greatest Name.

Bahá'u'lláh has commanded His followers to teach the Cause. Already thousands upon thousands are energetically applying the provisions of the Plan to open up avenues for them to guide souls to the Ocean of His Revelation. We look with expectant eyes to the day when teaching is the dominating passion in the life of every believer and when the unity of the community is so strong as to enable this state of enkindlement to express itself in unremitting action in the field of service. This, then, is our ardent hope for you and the object of our most fervent prayers at the Sacred Threshold.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

9 September 2007

To the Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In these difficult days laden with tribulation, we are with you in spirit, our hearts heavy at the injustice that continues to rain upon you. The persistent position of the Iranian authorities in banning Bahá'í students from access to higher education is deeply saddening. The policy was clearly confirmed in a recently disclosed communication by the Central Security Office of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, confidentially conveyed to the officials of eighty-one universities in Iran, which called for the expulsion of any student discovered to be a Bahá'í. It has now been reaffirmed by the action taken recently by the Education Evaluation Organization, which declared as “incomplete”—and therefore invalid—the applications of some 800 Bahá'ís who took the national exam for university entrance for the coming academic year (2007–2008). These official acts are disappointing and shameful.

Only a few months ago, reports carried by newspapers about the expulsion of Bahá'í students in Iran were denied by a spokesperson for Iran's mission to the United Nations, who said outright that no one in Iran is expelled from university because of religion. That same assurance was given by the embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the United Kingdom, in a written response to the concern a British Member of Parliament had expressed about the government's treatment of Bahá'í students. A similar avowal by the Iranian embassy in Ethiopia appeared in a newspaper in that country following the publication of a story reporting Iran's covert plan to identify Bahá'ís and secretly monitor their activities throughout the country.

For more than two decades Bahá'í students in Iran were unable to enter university because the only way open to them would have been to misrepresent their Faith. Then, consequent to a concerted worldwide effort—involving governments, educational institutions, non-governmental organizations, and individuals—that raised questions about this situation, your government's representatives responded by averring that the reference to religion on the forms was not to identify university applicants by belief but only to specify the religion on which they wished to be examined.

That you would have received such explanations with a degree of scepticism is understandable. However, as a gesture of good will and to find a solution to an issue that adversely affects the good name of Iran, the Bahá'í community accepted this apparent clarification. At long last, you were able to feel hopeful that the way would now be clear for you to continue your education. Thus, some of you sat for the 2006–2007 entrance examination and were able to register at university. Your hopes were, however, short-lived, as over the course of this academic year more than half of those who had been enrolled were expelled, and we now have the Ministry's letter which confirms that for no other reason than your adherence to the Bahá'í Faith you will not be permitted to continue your education at institutions of higher learning in your country.

Recent events call to mind heart-rending episodes in the history of the Faith, of cruel deceptions wrought against your forebears. It is only appropriate that you strive to transcend the opposition against you with that same constructive resilience that characterized their response to the duplicity of their detractors. Peering beyond the distress of the difficulties assailing them, those heroic souls attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development. This, too, is your work. Their objective was to build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves; and thus, they set up schools, equally educating girls and boys; introduced progressive principles; promoted the sciences; contributed significantly to diverse fields such as agriculture, health, and industry—all of which accrued to the benefit of the nation. You, too, seek to render service to your homeland and to contribute to a renewal of civilization. They responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all. You, too, demonstrate such noble qualities and, holding fast to these same principles, you belie the slander purveyed against your Faith, evoking the admiration of the fair-minded.

This action of the government in obstructing youth, Bahá'í or otherwise, from access to higher education stands in contrast to the noble history of Iran's past attainments. How is it to be explained to the people of the world, especially the youth, when such doings can be perpetrated in a nation that claims adherence to Islamic principles? What then of the value of education as upheld in past centuries by these principles, which stimulated the establishment of renowned centres of learning and produced in your nation brilliant minds that, in advancing knowledge, made enduring contributions to the arts and sciences? What must be the repercussions for the nation when thoughtful people and eminent institutions abroad, in utter dismay, find it inconceivable that a Ministry charged with promoting learning would issue such directives as would deny citizens of its own country access to education? What can possibly be said by the officials responsible as to the moral grounds for such decisions? Can it reasonably be assumed that they have any regard for international commitments Iran has made to justice and fair-mindedness or, indeed, bear any awareness of the fear of God?

The sufferings you bear, the sacrifices you ceaselessly make, however grievous the circumstances, are only a part of the horrors agonizing millions upon millions in Iran and throughout the world in these times of global ferment. Such acknowledgement does not diminish in the least your adversity, but it is essential that you grasp its context. Bahá'u'lláh remarked often on the dire state of the world. "The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divides and afflicts the human race is daily increasing," He wrote. "The world is in great turmoil and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion."

In response to their agonies, some feel impelled to rise against their oppressors, some can only flee for refuge, some capitulate to their fate. But while most of the afflicted peoples of the world are often the victims of random forces of oppression, prejudice, or injustice, you know clearly why you suffer, and your response must be equally clear. Consider some of the exhortations of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men." "Pay ye no heed to aversion and rejection, to disdain, hostility, injustice: act ye in the opposite way." "If others ... poison your lives, sweeten their souls ..." "Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a centre of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world...." "Be ye the helpers of every victim of oppression, the patrons of the disadvantaged." "Let him do some good to every person whose path he

crosseth, and be of some benefit to him.” “...undertake in all sincerity and purity of intent and for the sake of God alone, to counsel and exhort the masses and clarify their vision with that collyrium which is knowledge.”

Did Bahá'u'lláh Himself not endure hardship to promulgate His Teachings? Did He not consent “to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage”?

With an illumined conscience, with a world-embracing vision, with no partisan political agenda, and with due regard for law and order, strive for the regeneration of your country. By your deeds and services, attract the hearts of those around you, even win the esteem of your avowed enemies, so that you may vindicate the innocence of, and gain ever-increasing respect and acceptance for, your community in the land of its birth. Think not that these are mere words meant to soothe your disappointed hearts. Think rather of the situation which has developed as a result of the disciplined reaction to the torment borne by Iranian Bahá'ís since 1979. Has the manner of their response to oppression thus far not elicited the warm admiration of increasing numbers of their compatriots? To defend yourselves is, of course, only fair, and every principled means is being taken to defend you against oppression. Is there not an active defense mounted on your behalf by governments and non-governmental organizations, at national and international levels, and well-respected institutions of higher learning everywhere? Obviously, you are not alone. But your perseverance must be accompanied by patience; indeed, the patience required in the usually slow processes of social evolution is painful.

Opposition to a newly revealed truth is a common matter of human history; it repeats itself in every age. But of equal historical consistency is the fact that nothing can prevail against an idea whose time has come. The time has arrived for freedom of belief, for harmony between science and religion, faith and reason, for the advancement of women, for freedom from prejudice of every kind, for mutual respect between diverse peoples and nations, indeed, for the unity of the entire human race. The deepest yearnings of the Iranian people resonate with implications of the world-revolutionizing principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh.

Service to others is the way. Let it be your watchword, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá being your exemplar. Like Him, you can find practical ways of serving your fellow citizens. Strive to work hand-in-hand, shoulder-to-shoulder, with your fellow citizens in your efforts to promote the common good.

This surely is a time for the gallantry of illumined souls. Very dear friends, we pray that you can be counted among this noble company.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

26 November 2007

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We are moved on the occasion of this Day of the Covenant to reflect on the august Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God in the aftermath of the decease only two months ago of the last remaining Hand of the Cause, Dr. 'Alí-Muḥammad Varqá. It was just a few weeks before the fiftieth anniversary of the passing of Shoghi Effendi that our world community suffered this grievous loss. How sobering, indeed, it is to realize that Dr. Varqá's departure brought to an end the remarkable stewardship of an institution whose legacy is unparalleled in religious history! At so significant a juncture in the Formative Age of the Faith, it is only fitting that an effort be made to understand more deeply than before the significance of the achievements of so outstanding an organ of the Administrative Order—one that proved to be so integral to the evolution of our world community during its nascent years.

We trace the origins of the Institution to Bahá'u'lláh Himself, Who designated four renowned promoters of His teachings as Hands of the Cause of God. In a period before the administrative system of the Faith was inaugurated, they became rallying points for the friends, as much because of the virtuous character of their personal lives as for their unceasing endeavours in proclaiming the Teachings and defending the Faith against its detractors. They remained resolute in such activities despite the severe persecution, including imprisonment in some instances, to which they were subjected by the authorities. These distinguished personages remained active during the ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who, in 1899, instructed them to take steps to form the Local Spiritual Assembly of Ṭihrán, on which they all served. The focus of these first Hands on propagation and protection of the Faith, as well as their efforts to edify believers as to the importance of the new Laws, intimated even then the pattern of functioning the Institution would adopt at a later stage in the advancement of the Bahá'í community.

The Master did not Himself appoint Hands of the Cause, but referred to four believers posthumously as such. However, His Will and Testament confirmed the Institution and extended it by authorizing the Guardian of the Faith to appoint consecrated souls to it. At first, over a period of three decades, Shoghi Effendi named ten such souls posthumously; all were distinguished for the constancy, vigour and impact of their efforts to propagate the Cause and promote its best interests. The Guardian's designation in December 1951 of twelve living believers as Hands of the Cause introduced the Bahá'í world to a wholly new dynamic in the operation of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh; through it the Hands exerted an unusual vitality during the Ten Year Crusade, particularly after the sudden passing of the Sign of God. His subsequent appointment of seven more in February 1952 and replacement thereafter of five of those deceased kept the number of living Hands at nineteen until less than a month before his departure, when in his last message to the Bahá'í world he identified an additional eight, bringing the total to twenty-seven. Shoghi Effendi's description of them as the "Chief Stewards of Bahá'u'lláh's embryonic World Commonwealth" prefigured the world-shaking reality of the unexpected responsibilities that would be thrust upon them on the morrow of his passing.

The Guardian now forever gone, the Hands' first task, despite the sorrow that overwhelmed them, was to restore the composure of a grief-stricken community. A vital aspect of that task was, of course, to settle the minds of the friends about the direction that the Faith would take. The Hands acted with dispatch. Only sixteen days after the burial of the Guardian, they issued from the Holy Land a proclamation to the Bahá'ís of East and West. Declaring that, after a thorough search, no will or instruction of Shoghi Effendi had been found, they set forth in this message the procedures they would follow in meeting the daunting challenge they faced. It announced that a body of nine Hands, designated "Custodians", was constituted to function at the Bahá'í World Centre to protect the Faith, maintain communications with National Spiritual Assemblies in connection with the prosecution of the Ten Year Plan and on administrative matters, and attend to all issues related to the preservation of the World Centre of the Faith. The friends everywhere derived from this first communication assurance that the ship of the Cause would safely traverse the waters severely troubled by the Guardian's passing. Subsequent messages issued from conclaves of the Hands held in the Holy Land further infused confidence in the believers who arose to meet the goals set before them in the Plan.

The Hands residing outside the Holy Land, in addition to giving close attention to the progress of the Plan in their own regions, undertook extensive journeys to visit and encourage the believers in every clime. Their travels covered the entire surface of the planet as they pursued every opportunity to advance the work of the Plan left by Shoghi Effendi. The obligations of the Hands spelled out in the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were carried out with the selflessness, fearlessness and zeal characteristic of their activity. To "diffuse the Divine Fragrances, to edify the souls of men, to promote learning, to improve the character of all men"—all these they undertook with outstanding, sometimes astonishing, results. Such travels did not cease with the conclusion of the Ten Year Plan but continued with unabated intensity, the legendary journeys of Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum generating immeasurable stimulus. Thus the activities of the Hands demonstrated to a superlative degree the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that the "movement itself from place to place, when undertaken for the sake of God, hath always exerted, and can now exert, its influence in the world."

Among the principal results of their combined labours, these stand out: maintenance of the stature of the Faith as an independent and indivisible Order; protection of the Cause against schism, despite the disloyalty to the Covenant of one among their exalted company, Mason Remey, whom they were obliged to cast out; preservation of the properties and maintenance of the Holy Places and gardens at the World Centre; success in the vast expansion of the Faith. All these hard-won accomplishments prepared the path to the smooth transition that the Hands effected from the ministry of Shoghi Effendi, as head of the Faith, to that of the Universal House of Justice, for whose first election they meticulously prepared the Bahá'í world, especially the fifty-six National Spiritual Assemblies that participated in it. The Hands of the Cause delivered to the House of Justice a community that was so greatly transformed during the Ten Year Plan as to place the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh on the map as a world religion in every legitimate sense. The grand celebration at the World Congress in London attended by Bahá'ís from countries of every continent demonstrated the validity of that claim.

Beyond the World Crusade, the Hands of the Cause threw the full weight of their support behind the newly formed Universal House of Justice, whose creation their valiant efforts ensured. They undertook many missions on its behalf and pursued tasks befitting their continuing obligation to propagate and protect the Faith. As in the absence of the Guardian there was no way further to appoint Hands of the Cause, the Hands in the Holy Land in particular performed what may well be viewed as a distinct and final mark of service: they assisted the House of Justice to extend into the future the functions of

propagation and protection in the special character of their institution. Hence, in 1968 Continental Boards of Counsellors were raised up and then in 1973 was created the International Teaching Centre foreshadowed in the writings of Shoghi Effendi. In their tireless support of the House of Justice in the design of these institutions and in the guidance they lent to their development, the Hands left to the Bahá'í world a further legacy that only future generations will be able adequately to appreciate. A shining value of their ultimate exertions is evident in the stature to which the International Teaching Centre has risen in such a short time and the permeating influence of the institution of the Counsellors which reaches every nook and cranny of our worldwide community.

It is highly worthy of note that the body of the Hands, with one exception, remained unbeguiled by the allurements of power that commonly corrupt those who are suddenly thrust by force of circumstances into positions of elevated rank and authority. In this instance, all of creation cannot but bear witness to the integrity of their stewardship, the unblemished virtue of their faithfulness to principle.

A point to ponder as well is the survival to the last of the one who was simultaneously appointed in 1955 to the two offices of Hand of the Cause and Trustee of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. That he was able to shape the latter institution and finally to see to its administrative transition in the formation in 2005 of the International Board of Trustees of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, with branches spread throughout the globe, is yet another sign of the constancy and abundance of the providential confirmations which have attended the evolution of the Administrative Order. Clearly, then, the work of the divinely ordained Institution of the Hands of the Cause of God was indispensable to the progress of the Faith from the Heroic Age to an early period of the Formative Age; its effects are certain to endure as an integral part of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The passing of Dr. Varqá marks both the end of a chapter of Bahá'í history and the beginning of a new stage in the unfolding of that Order.

With such thoughts astir in our minds, we recognize with increasing wonder and appreciation the magnitude of the contributions of the Hands of the Cause of God to the growth and consolidation of the Faith in all parts of the world. In our grateful hearts we recite with deep emotion the benediction so eloquently exclaimed by the Lord of Hosts: "Light and glory, greeting and praise be upon the Hands of His Cause, through whom the light of fortitude hath shone forth and the truth hath been established that the authority to choose rests with God, the Powerful, the Mighty, the Unconstrained, through whom the ocean of bounty hath surged and the fragrance of the gracious favours of God, the Lord of mankind, hath been diffused."

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

18 February 2008

The Friends in Iran

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We have received a letter from a believer in Iran with questions about the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice. We appreciate that firmness in the Covenant is among the distinctive characteristics of the believers in that land, who are informed of the principles and essential facts pertaining to the succession of authority in the Cause. Nevertheless, none among them should hesitate to seek clarification of matters about which they have questions, for the enemies of the Faith are tireless in their attempts to sow seeds of confusion and doubt. Moreover, it is beneficial, in view of the beloved Master's exhortations to us all to be ever-vigilant concerning matters of protection, for the friends to review the relevant essentials from time to time. We have therefore decided to provide you with the following comments. In this connection, you are also encouraged to reacquaint yourselves with the document "Mason Remey and Those Who Followed Him", a statement prepared at our instruction by an ad hoc committee. A translation of the statement is enclosed.

Questions concerning the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice can be resolved through careful study of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and the elucidations of the House of Justice, which, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, will "deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide," He assures the friends, "has the same effect as the Text itself."

Prior to the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, the provisions He had put in place in His Will and Testament to safeguard the Faith and ensure its steady advancement into the future were generally unknown. The believers anticipated a day when the Universal House of Justice would be established since it had been specifically mentioned in the Sacred Texts. There was, however, no definite understanding that there would be a Guardian. Indeed, Shoghi Effendi later indicated that he had no foreknowledge of the position to which he would be called. At most, he had reportedly thought the Will and Testament might charge him, as the eldest grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, with responsibility for arranging for the election of the House of Justice. Only after the reading of the Will did the institution of the Guardianship become widely known, and the Bahá'í community worldwide acknowledged Shoghi Effendi as the Head of the Faith to whom all must turn.

An attentive reading of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will makes it clear that He did not indicate a predestined outcome but did provide for a number of circumstances which, depending on future conditions, might eventually confront the Faith. The second section of the Will, for instance, which refers only to the Universal House of Justice, with no mention of the Guardianship, was written at a time when His own life was in imminent danger and Shoghi Effendi was but a small boy. During that same period, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had made arrangements for the election of the Universal House of Justice to take place immediately, should the threat on His life materialize. Through the grace of God, the crisis passed, and it was ultimately left to Shoghi Effendi many years later, as Guardian and Head of the Faith, to determine the timing of the formation of the House of Justice. Early on he considered the possibility of holding the election soon after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in which case the House of Justice and the

Guardian would have functioned simultaneously. He determined, of course, that the foundations of the Administrative Order needed first to be firmly laid at the local and national levels, and it eventually transpired that the House of Justice was established several years after his own passing. That the transition from the ministry of the Guardian to the election of the Universal House of Justice occurred with such relative ease can, itself, be attributed to the way certain provisions in the Will were formulated.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will and Testament clearly allows for the possibility of a successor to Shoghi Effendi, and in this light, we find statements written by him or on his behalf over the course of his thirty-six-year ministry that envision future Guardians. However, there are no assurances in the Writings that the line of Guardians would continue throughout the Dispensation; rather, the possibility is envisaged that such a line would come to an end. In this respect, Bahá’u’lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas:

Endowments dedicated to charity revert to God, the Revealer of Signs. None hath the right to dispose of them without leave from Him Who is the Dawning- place of Revelation. After Him, this authority shall pass to the Aghsán, and after them to the House of Justice — should it be established in the world by then — that they may use these endowments for the benefit of the Places which have been exalted in this Cause, and for whatsoever hath been enjoined upon them by Him Who is the God of might and power. Otherwise, the endowments shall revert to the people of Bahá who speak not except by His leave and judge not save in accordance with what God hath decreed in this Tablet—lo, they are the champions of victory betwixt heaven and earth — that they may use them in the manner that hath been laid down in the Book by God, the Mighty, the Bountiful.

The passing of Shoghi Effendi precipitated the situation described, in which the authority vested in the Aghsán — first in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and then in Shoghi Effendi — ended before the House of Justice was established.

In His Will and Testament, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifies in the clearest terms the conditions according to which Shoghi Effendi was to have named his successor as Guardian:

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon the guardian of the Cause of God to appoint in his own life-time him that shall become his successor, that differences may not arise after his passing. He that is appointed must manifest in himself detachment from all worldly things, must be the essence of purity, must show in himself the fear of God, knowledge, wisdom and learning. Thus, should the first-born of the guardian of the Cause of God not manifest in himself the truth of the words: — “The child is the secret essence of its sire,” that is, should he not inherit of the spiritual within him (the guardian of the Cause of God) and his glorious lineage not be matched with a goodly character, then must he, (the guardian of the Cause of God) choose another branch to succeed him.

The Hands of the Cause of God must elect from their own number nine persons that shall at all times be occupied in the important services in the work of the guardian of the Cause of God. The election of these nine must be carried either unanimously or by majority from the company of the Hands of the Cause of God and these, whether unanimously or by a majority vote, must give their assent to the choice of the one whom the guardian of the Cause of God hath chosen as his successor. This assent must be given in such wise as the assenting and dissenting voices may not be distinguished (i.e., secret ballot).

The personal views of any individual regarding the above statement, no matter how learned, cannot compare with the Guardian's infallible understanding of the passage. Shoghi Effendi, who faithfully adhered to the wishes of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá throughout his ministry, would never have been careless in a matter so essential to the integrity of the Faith as the question of the appointment of his successor. It is unthinkable that he would appoint someone to succeed him who did not possess the qualifications laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will. It is equally untenable to suggest that he would do so in a manner which deviated from the explicit requirements in that same document, which included the affirmation of his choice by nine designated Hands of the Cause of God, so that "differences" would "not arise after his passing." How perverse the suggestion of the violators of the Covenant that Shoghi Effendi would ignore the Master's instructions and make a veiled and indirect appointment of his successor! Rather should the fact that Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor be seen as a sign of his meticulous adherence to every word of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and an indication of his conclusion that there was no qualified individual whom he could appoint.

Therefore, it should be clear to every steadfast follower of Bahá'u'lláh that the end of the line of Guardians was not the result of any decision or action taken by the Hands of the Cause of God following the sudden passing of Shoghi Effendi. The line was brought to a close when, compelled by existing circumstances and the strict provisions of the Will, Shoghi Effendi did not name a successor. To entertain the possibility that it may one day be re-established is futile. 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that "ere the expiration of a thousand years, no one has the right to utter a single word, even to claim the station of Guardianship." And in the same passage He exhorted the friends, "Should there be differences of opinion, the Supreme House of Justice would immediately resolve the problems." The Universal House of Justice, soon after its formation, stated that it "finds that there is no way to appoint or to legislate to make it possible to appoint a second Guardian to succeed Shoghi Effendi."

While the line of Guardians has ended, the Covenant is preserved. The vast body of interpretations of Shoghi Effendi informs the decisions of the Universal House of Justice as the Faith continues its onward march. The unity of the Faith is safeguarded, and the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's great purpose for humanity assured. "The Hand of Omnipotence hath established His Revelation upon an unassailable, an enduring foundation," Bahá'u'lláh has stated. "Storms of human strife are powerless to undermine its basis, nor will men's fanciful theories succeed in damaging its structure."

* * *

With reference to the specific questions raised in the letter we have received, one concerns the meaning of the designation "Aghsán", as found in the Writings. While in some cases, as affirmed by the Guardian, the term applies specifically to Bahá'u'lláh's sons, at other times it is used more broadly to include His male descendants. For example, in His Will and Testament 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Shoghi Effendi as "the chosen branch" (Ghuṣn-i-Mumtáz). The reference to Shoghi Effendi as Ghuṣn here — the singular form of Aghsán — follows the usage of Bahá'u'lláh in relation to the titles He gave His sons, that is, the Most Great Branch, the Greater Branch, and the Purest Branch. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains that the word Aghsán "refers to Bahá'u'lláh's descendants"; another describes Hussein Rabbani, the Guardian's brother, as "the grandchild of the Master, an Afnán and Aghsán mentioned in the Will and Testament of the Master." It is evident, then, that the designation Aghsán, or Ghuṣn, includes Shoghi Effendi and the other male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh.

If, at any time, male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh appear who are faithful to the Covenant, it would nevertheless not be possible for any of them to occupy the office of Guardian, for, as already explained, in the absence of appointment by Shoghi Effendi, they cannot claim the station of Guardianship and there is no way for one to be named to it by an act of the House of Justice.

* * *

Another query concerns the establishment of the Universal House of Justice. Specifically, the question has been asked whether the functioning of an “officially recognized” International Bahá'í Court in the Holy Land, mentioned by Shoghi Effendi, was an essential preliminary step in the evolution of the Universal House of Justice.

As you are no doubt aware, Shoghi Effendi explained that “Abdu'l-Bahá, Himself, in one of His earliest Tablets, contemplated the possibility of the formation of the Universal House of Justice in His own lifetime.” The Master described the requirements necessary for its formation, which did not include the establishment of a religious court:

The Supreme House of Justice should be elected according to the system followed in the election of the parliaments of Europe. And when the countries would be guided the Houses of Justice of the various countries would elect the Supreme House of Justice.

At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme House of Justice.

The establishment of that House is not dependent upon the conversion of all the nations of the world. For example, if conditions were favourable and no disturbances would be caused, the friends in Persia would elect their representatives, and likewise the friends in America, in India, and other areas would also elect their representatives, and these would elect a House of Justice. That House of Justice would be the Supreme House of Justice. That is all.

Over the thirty-six years of his ministry, as he guided the Bahá'í world, striving to lay the foundations of the Administrative Order, Shoghi Effendi outlined specific developmental steps to be taken, which were intended to lead to the eventual establishment of the Universal House of Justice. The accomplishment of some depended largely on the exertions of the believers themselves — an increase in the number of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, the appointment of the International Bahá'í Council and its evolution into an elected body. Others, however, were subject to the forces operating in society and, no matter what the efforts made by the Bahá'í community, could not be accomplished.

In 1929, for instance, the Guardian stated, “given favorable circumstances, under which the Bahá'ís of Persia and of the adjoining countries under Soviet rule may be enabled to elect their national representatives ... the only remaining obstacle in the way of the definite formation of the International House of Justice will have been removed.” Later, following the expulsion of Bahá'ís from Russia by the authorities, a letter written on his behalf explained, “At the time he referred to Russia there were Bahá'ís there, now the Community has practically ceased to exist; therefore the formation of the International House of Justice cannot depend on a Russian National Spiritual Assembly.”

In the same way, goals were specified by Shoghi Effendi for the establishment of Bahá'í courts, including national courts in certain countries in Asia and, as a step in the development of the International Bahá'í Council, the precursor to the Universal House of Justice, a court in the Holy Land. Recognition by the Egyptian government of the National Spiritual Assembly as an independent Bahá'í court was sought as far back as 1929. Over time, changing conditions rendered the formation of such religious courts impossible. As the Hands of the Cause of God commented in 1959 in calling for the election of the International Bahá'í Council and the eventual establishment of the House of Justice,

We wish to assure the believers that every effort will be made to establish a Bahá'í Court in the Holy Land prior to the date set for this election. We should however bear in mind that the Guardian himself clearly indicated this goal, due to the strong trend towards the secularization of Religious Courts in this part of the world, might not be achieved.

* * *

Yet another question that has been raised concerns the discharge by the Universal House of Justice of certain functions previously performed by the Guardian. With regard to Ḥuqúqu'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that "Disposition of the Ḥuqúq, wholly or partly, is permissible, but this should be done by permission of the authority in the Cause to whom all must turn." Likewise, the expulsion of Covenant-breakers is an obligation exercised by the Head of the Faith in the context of the duty to protect the Cause from those who would seek to undermine its unity. Shoghi Effendi, it is well known, was obliged to expel Covenant-breakers from the Faith at different points throughout his ministry, both before and after the appointment of the Hands of the Cause of God. This responsibility now falls on the Universal House of Justice, as the centre of authority to whom all must turn. The current procedures followed in this respect are outlined in the statement "The Institution of the Counsellors".

In this connection it should be noted that after the passing of Shoghi Effendi, although overwhelmed with grief, the Bahá'í world maintained its unity during the tenuous period between his ministry and the election of the Universal House of Justice. The sole challenge to its integrity appeared some two years after his death when Charles Mason Remey, who was at that time one of the Hands of the Cause, laid claim to the Guardianship. As you are aware, Remey asserted that his appointment in 1951 as president of the nascent International Bahá'í Council meant that he should automatically assume the position of head of the Universal House of Justice and was, therefore, the second Guardian.

The absurdity of Remey's claim is obvious and requires little elaboration. In 1957, he was among the Hands of the Cause who gathered in the Holy Land to consider what course of action should be taken following the unexpected passing of the Guardian. He personally affirmed that Shoghi Effendi had appointed no successor, signing a document issued unanimously by the Hands to this effect. As signatory to yet another such document, he agreed that the entire body of the Hands of the Cause would determine when and how the evolution of the International Bahá'í Council would culminate in the election of the House of Justice. For two years, as one of the nine Hands designated to serve in the Holy Land, he participated in the consultations that guided the development of the Bahá'í community. Then, without notice or discussion with his fellow Hands, he claimed the station of Guardianship, lacking explicit appointment by Shoghi Effendi as specified in the Will and Testament and in direct violation of the command of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that no one could make such a claim. Exercising the authority conferred on them in accordance with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, the Hands of the Cause expelled him from the Faith as a Covenant-breaker.

In matters related to the Covenant, the friends must be firm and steadfast; they should be wary, lest the arguments put forward by those who sow seeds of doubt become the cause for confusion or lead to disputation and disunity. Should questions arise that cannot be resolved, they should be placed immediately before the Universal House of Justice. The friends must be especially careful to avoid being enticed by the whisperings of the remnants of the Covenant-breakers and their supporters, who seek to shake the believers' faith. Whereas in the past the violators of the Covenant sought to undermine the authority of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, today they challenge the Universal House of Justice. Of particular concern are those who, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns, "assert their firmness and steadfastness in the Covenant but when they come across responsive ears they secretly sow the seeds of suspicion."

Remey's small band of associates, bedevilled by half a century of infighting among competing factions, have had negligible effect on the progress of the Faith. The flurry caused by their actions does nothing more than shake a few lifeless twigs and leaves from the tree of the Cause. Those who are naïve, those who are not deepened in the Teachings or not firm in the Covenant, those who are controlled by their egos and lust for leadership can be misled and fall away. The friends are urged to protect themselves and their community by adhering strictly to the emphatic exhortations repeated throughout the Sacred Texts. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states,

Unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the Truth and the Purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant. By this House is meant that Universal House of Justice which is to be elected from all countries, that is from those parts in the East and West where the loved ones are to be found, after the manner of the customary elections in Western countries such as those of England....

And now, one of the greatest and most fundamental principles of the Cause of God is to shun and avoid entirely the Covenant-breakers, for they will utterly destroy the Cause of God, exterminate His Law and render of no account all efforts exerted in the past. O friends! It behooveth you to call to mind with tenderness the trials of His Holiness, the Exalted One, and show your fidelity to the Ever-Blest Beauty. The utmost endeavour must be exerted lest all these woes, trials and afflictions, all this pure and sacred blood that hath been shed so profusely in the Path of God, may prove to be in vain....

O ye beloved of the Lord! Strive with all your heart to shield the Cause of God from the onslaught of the insincere, for souls such as these cause the straight to become crooked and all benevolent efforts to produce contrary results.

The believers in the Cradle of the Faith, who have withstood for more than a century the onslaught of government and clergy, who triumphed over the perils posed by the rebellions of Azal and Muḥammad 'Alí, who severed themselves from those who opposed Shoghi Effendi, will easily discount the spurious and ridiculous arguments of those few individuals who vie among themselves to exploit Remey's deviation as a pretext for attracting a handful of personal followers. Be assured of our supplications at the Holy Threshold on behalf of the beloved friends everywhere in that sacred land.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2008

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. As they call on one another in their homes and pay visits to families, friends and acquaintances, they enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import, deepen their knowledge of the Faith, share Bahá'u'lláh's message, and welcome increasing numbers to join them in a mighty spiritual enterprise. Aware of the aspirations of the children of the world and their need for spiritual education, they extend their efforts widely to involve ever-growing contingents of participants in classes that become centres of attraction for the young and strengthen the roots of the Faith in society. They assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. And with the advantage of a greater abundance of human resources, an increasing number of them are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions. Such is the panorama before us as we pause this Riḍván to observe the progress of the worldwide Bahá'í community.

On several occasions we have indicated that the aim of the series of global Plans that will carry the Bahá'í world to the celebration of the centenary of the Faith's Formative Age in 2021 will be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the community. At this, the midway point of what will be a quarter of a century of consistent, focused exertion, the evidences of increased capacity are everywhere apparent. Of particular significance is the widening impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between the three participants in the Plan. Institutions, from the national to the local level, see with ever greater clarity how to create conditions conducive to the expression of the spiritual energies of a growing number of believers in pursuit of a common goal. The community is serving more and more as that environment in which individual effort and collective action, mediated by the institute, can complement each other in order to achieve progress. The vibrancy it manifests and the unity of purpose that animates its endeavours are drawing into its swelling ranks those from every walk of life eager to dedicate their time and energies to the welfare of humanity. That the doors of the community are more widely open for any receptive soul to enter and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is clear. No greater testament is there to the efficacy of the interactions among the Plan's three participants than the dramatic acceleration in the tempo of teaching that was witnessed this past year. The advance made in the process of entry by troops was significant indeed.

Within the sphere of these enhanced interactions, individual initiative is becoming increasingly effective. In previous messages we have referred to the impetus that the institute process imparts to the exercise of initiative by the individual believer. The friends in every continent are engaged in study of the Writings for the explicit purpose of learning to apply the teachings to the growth of the Faith. Remarkable numbers are now shouldering responsibility for the spiritual vitality of their communities; energetically, they are carrying out those acts of service befitting a healthy pattern of growth. As they have persevered in the field of service to the Cause, maintaining a humble posture of learning, their courage and wisdom, zeal and acuity, fervour and circumspection, determination and trust in God have combined all the more to reinforce one another. In their presentation of the message of Bahá'u'lláh and the exposition of its verities, they have taken to heart the words of Shoghi Effendi that they must neither "hesitate" nor "falter", neither "overstress" nor "whittle down" the truth which they champion. Neither are they "fanatical" nor "excessively liberal". Through their constancy in teaching, they have increased their ability to determine whether the receptivity of their listener requires them to be "wary" or "bold", to "act swiftly" or to "mark time", to be "direct" or "indirect" in the methods they employ.

What we continue to find encouraging is how well disciplined is this individual initiative. Communities everywhere are gradually internalizing the lessons being learned from systematization, and the framework defined by the current series of Plans lends consistency and flexibility to the endeavours of the friends. Far from restricting them, this framework enables them to seize opportunities, to build relationships, and to translate into reality a vision of systematic growth. In a word, it gives shape to their collective powers.

As we survey what has been accomplished around the world, our hearts are filled with particular admiration for the believers in Iran, who, under the most arduous conditions, have arisen boldly to serve their country and are bending their energies toward its revitalization, though the avenues open to them are limited. And given the restrictions placed on the administration of the Faith, they have set out on an individual basis to acquaint their fellow citizens with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, directly engaging them in conversations about His redeeming message. Not only have they received unprecedented support from enlightened souls as they have begun to do so, but they have encountered a receptivity far beyond anything they would have imagined possible.

Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh conscious of the forces of integration and disintegration operating in society today sees the relationship between the rise in receptivity to the Faith in all parts of the globe and the failings of the world's systems. That such receptivity will increase as the agonies of humanity deepen is certain. Let there be no mistake: The capacity building that has been set in motion to respond to mounting receptivity is still in its earliest stages. The magnitude of the demands of a world in disarray will test this capacity to its limits in the years ahead. Humanity is battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious prejudice or the pinnacles of rampant materialism. Bahá'ís are able to discern the causes of this affliction. "What 'oppression' is more grievous", Bahá'u'lláh asks, "than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" There is no time to lose. Continued progress must be achieved in the activity and development of the three participants in the Plan.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has extolled "two calls" to "success and prosperity" that can be heard from the "heights of the happiness of mankind". One is the call of "civilization", of "progress of the material world". It comprises the "laws", "regulations", "arts and sciences" through which humanity develops. The other is

the “soul-stirring call of God”, on which depends the eternal happiness of humanity. “This second call”, the Master has explained, “is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of the Lord and the admonitions and altruistic emotions belonging to the realm of morality which, like unto a brilliant light, brighten and illumine the lamp of the realities of mankind. Its penetrative power is the Word of God.” As you continue to labour in your clusters, you will be drawn further and further into the life of the society around you and will be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which you are engaged to encompass a growing range of human endeavours. In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.

Sustaining growth in cluster after cluster will depend on the qualities that distinguish your service to the peoples of the world. So free must be your thoughts and actions of any trace of prejudice—racial, religious, economic, national, tribal, class, or cultural—that even the stranger sees in you loving friends. So high must be your standard of excellence and so pure and chaste your lives that the moral influence you exert penetrates the consciousness of the wider community. Only if you demonstrate the rectitude of conduct to which the writings of the Faith call every soul will you be able to struggle against the myriad forms of corruption, overt and subtle, eating at the vitals of society. Only if you perceive honour and nobility in every human being—this independent of wealth or poverty—will you be able to champion the cause of justice. And to the extent that administrative processes of your institutions are governed by the principles of Bahá’í consultation will the great masses of humanity be able to take refuge in the Bahá’í community.

As you press ahead, be confident that the Concourse on high is marshalling its forces and stands ready to come to your aid. Our continued prayers will surround you.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

20 October 2008

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Today, the anniversary of the Birth of the Báb, marks the midway point of the five-year enterprise that will engage the Bahá'í world until Ridván 2011. We bow our heads in humble gratitude to Bahá'u'lláh for the favours and confirmations He has vouchsafed unto those labouring so diligently and sacrificially in the forefront of the teaching work. Since the conclusion of the Tenth International Bahá'í Convention a few months ago, there has been a rise in awareness of the efficacy of the framework governing the operation of the Five Year Plan as insights gained by the delegates have been widely diffused throughout the Bahá'í community. Scores of clusters around the globe are being primed for systematic expansion, and we expect to see a wave of intensive programmes of growth launched in the months leading up to Ridván next year.

The challenge facing the friends in these and all clusters continues to be twofold in character. While learning to identify receptive segments of society and share with responsive souls the message of the Faith—an aspiration generally not difficult to fulfil—they are striving to understand in practice how the diverse elements of a healthy pattern of growth, particularly the development of human resources, are to be integrated into a cohesive whole. How heartening it is to see that the moment the friends in a cluster begin to meet this dual challenge, immediate progress is achieved; the goal of launching an intensive programme of growth becomes imminently attainable.

That the continued strengthening of the community should be matched by a further decline in the old world order comes as no surprise. Indeed, the friends should be on their guard, lest the development of capacity in the community not keep pace with the rise in receptivity of a disillusioned humanity. Behold how even in the short span of time since we raised this warning in our Ridván message, financial structures once thought to be impregnable have tottered and world leaders have shown their inability to devise more than temporary solutions, a failing to which they increasingly confess. Whatever expedient measures are adopted, confidence has been shaken and a sense of security lost. Surely such developments have caused the believers in every land to reflect on the lamentable condition of the present order and have reinforced in them the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together.

It is with these thoughts in mind that we turn our hearts in frequent prayer to Bahá'u'lláh and beseech Him to strengthen His followers through His unfailing grace. In such moments, we implore Him to illumine their souls with the light of knowledge and faith. Let them not underestimate the power inherent in the system they are putting in place for the propagation of His Faith, nor mistake the true purpose of the global enterprise on which they have embarked. Let them not deviate from the path of learning on which they are set, nor be distracted by the ephemeral pursuits of a bewildered society. Let them not fail to appreciate the value of the culture now taken root in the community that promotes the systematic study of the Creative Word in small groups in order to build capacity for service. Let them never forget the imperative to tend to the needs of the children of the world and offer them lessons that develop their spiritual faculties and lay the foundations of a noble and upright character. Let them

come to realize the full significance of their efforts to help young people form a strong moral identity in their early adolescent years and empower them to contribute to the well-being of their communities. And let them rejoice at having learned through consistent, systematic action how to establish a rhythm of growth that pays due attention to the essential elements of expansion, consolidation, reflection and planning. May they one and all be endowed with constancy and fidelity and be granted the courage to make whatever sacrifices are needed to ensure the resounding success of the Plan. By the rectitude of their conduct, the sincerity of their love for their fellow human beings, and the ardour of their desire to serve the peoples of the world, may they vindicate the truth proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh that humanity is one. May they be diligent in their efforts to establish ties of friendship that show no regard for prevalent social barriers and ceaselessly endeavour to bind hearts together in the love of God. That they may recognize the profound implications of their mission is our fervent hope. That they may not falter in accomplishing their ambitious goals, no matter how severe the crises engulfing the world around them, is our most heartfelt prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

To provide the opportunity for the friends to gather together, as much to celebrate the feats already achieved during the Plan as to deliberate on its current exigencies, we announce the convocation of a series of regional conferences, forty-one in number, to be held in the following cities between November and March: Abidjan, Accra, Almaty, Antofagasta, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Battambang, Bologna, Bukavu, Chicago, Dallas, Frankfurt, Guadalajara, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Kiev, Kolkata, Kuala Lumpur, Kuching, Lae, London, Los Angeles, Lubumbashi, Lusaka, Madrid, Managua, Manila, Nakuru, New Delhi, Portland, Quito, São Paulo, Stamford, Sydney, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Yaoundé. To each of these conferences, two members of the International Teaching Centre will be sent as our representatives. National Spiritual Assemblies in hosting countries will have further details available regarding participation. We urge the believers, both those fully engaged in executing the provisions of the Plan and those whose circumstances have prevented them from fulfilling their desire to do so until now, to avail themselves of this opportunity and attend the conference to be held in their area.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2009

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A mere three years ago we set before the Bahá'í world the challenge of exploiting the framework for action that had emerged with such clarity at the conclusion of the last global Plan. The response, as we had hoped, was immediate. With great vigour the friends everywhere began to pursue the goal of establishing intensive programmes of growth in no less than 1,500 clusters worldwide, and the number of such programmes soon started to climb. But no one could have imagined then how profoundly the Lord of Hosts, in His inscrutable wisdom, intended to transform His community in so short a span of time. What a purposeful and confident community it was that celebrated its accomplishments at the midway point of the current Plan in forty-one regional conferences across the globe! What an extraordinary contrast did its coherence and energy provide to the bewilderment and confusion of a world caught in a spiral of crisis! This, indeed, was the community of the blissful to which the Guardian had referred. This was a community aware of the vast potentialities with which it has been endowed and conscious of the role it is destined to play in rebuilding a broken world. This was a community in the ascendant, subject to severe repression in one part of the globe, yet rising up undeterred and undismayed as a united whole and strengthening its capacity to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's purpose to liberate humankind from the yoke of the most grievous oppression. And in the nearly eighty-thousand participants who attended the conferences we saw the emergence on the historical scene of an individual believer supremely confident in the efficacy of the Plan's methods and instruments and remarkably deft at wielding them. Each and every soul of this mighty sea stood as testimony to the transforming potency of the Faith. Each and every one was evidence of Bahá'u'lláh's promise to assist all those who arise with detachment and sincerity to serve Him. Each and every one offered a glimpse of that race of beings, consecrated and courageous, pure and sanctified, destined to evolve over generations under the direct influence of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. In them we saw the first signs of the fulfilment of our hope expressed at the outset of the Plan that the edifying influence of the Faith would be extended to hundreds of thousands through the institute process. There is every indication that, by the end of the Riḍván period, the number of intensive programmes of growth around the world will have crossed the 1,000 mark. What more can we do at the opening of this most joyous Festival than to bow our heads in humility before God and offer Him thanksgiving for His unbounded generosity to the community of the Greatest Name.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 January 2010

To the Friends Gathered at the
Youth Conference in the United Kingdom

We have watched with admiration the eagerness with which the youth in the United Kingdom have stepped into the vanguard of the work of the Cause, reaching out to ever greater numbers of souls and engaging them in the community-building activities that lie at the heart of the Five Year Plan. Your earnestness, your energy, your intrepid determination not to shirk the demands of this Day mark you out for this all-important undertaking. Ably trained, spiritually enkindled, and eager for experience, you have arisen to seize the initiative in your immediate surroundings and beyond. The need for you to apply yourselves to service in two capacities in particular--as teachers of children's classes and as animators of junior youth groups--has never been more apparent. Countless parents yearn for the means of developing their children's spiritual faculties that would lay within them the foundations of a principled and upright character. And surely every young person will flourish in a programme that helps to form a strong moral identity in the critical years of early adolescence and empowers participants to contribute to the well-being of society. Beyond these specific fields of activity, you must not refrain from acquainting your peers with the potent, the compelling, the world-embracing mission with which you are charged. Which of them would not feel their spirits enriched for contemplating how, through the application of those far-reaching principles enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, the regeneration of the world can be accomplished and its perplexing crises resolved?

Which of them would not be raised to a new consciousness of humanity's capacity to "carry forward an ever-advancing civilization" by combining their energies with yours and bending them towards this noble aim?

That the spirit of this gathering may galvanize your energies and strengthen your resolve; that you may pledge to intensify your efforts in the path of service to humankind; above all, that you may be the recipients of an outpouring of the favours vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty to those who arise for His Cause--these are our ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2010

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With hearts filled with admiration for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, we are pleased to announce that, as this most joyous Riḍván season opens, there is in every continent of the globe a fresh complement of intensive programmes of growth under way, raising the total number worldwide over the 1,500 mark and securing the goal of the Five Year Plan, one year in advance of its conclusion. We bow our heads in gratitude to God for this astounding achievement, this signal victory. All who have laboured in the field will appreciate the bounty He has bestowed on His community in granting it a full year to strengthen the pattern of expansion and consolidation now everywhere established, in preparation for the tasks it will be called upon to undertake in its next global enterprise—a plan of five years' duration, the fifth in a series with the explicit aim of advancing the process of entry by troops.

We feel moved, as we take pause on this festive occasion, to make clear that what evokes such a deep sense of pride and gratitude in our hearts is not so much the numerical feat you have achieved, remarkable as it is, but a combination of developments at the more profound level of culture, to which this accomplishment attests. Chief among them is the rise we have observed in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving.

In recent messages we have expressed joy at witnessing the steady increase in the tempo of teaching across the globe. The discharge of this fundamental spiritual obligation by the individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. What the establishment of 1,500 intensive programmes of growth has made evident is how courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside. Even the most modest estimates suggest that there are now tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.

In their efforts to present the essentials of the Faith plainly and unequivocally, the believers have benefited greatly from the illustrative example in Book 6 of the Ruhi Institute. Where the logic underlying that presentation is appreciated, and the urge to convert it into a formula overcome, it gives rise to a conversation between two souls—a conversation distinguished by the depth of understanding achieved and the nature of the relationship established. To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation. Whether the first contact with such newly found friends elicits an invitation for them to enrol in the Bahá'í community or to participate in one of its activities is not an overwhelming concern. More important is that every soul feel welcome to join the community in contributing to the betterment of society, commencing a path of service to humanity on which, at the outset or further along, formal enrolment can occur.

The significance of this development should not be underestimated. In every cluster, once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should become a centre of intense activity. In an urban cluster, such a centre of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighbourhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose. Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as “door-to-door”, even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage—meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives—may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighbourhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. A rhythm of community life should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of a new World Order.

Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive programme of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

To meet this challenge, the believers and the institutions that serve them will have to strengthen the institute process in the cluster, increasing significantly within its borders the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles; for it should be recognized that the opportunity now open to the friends to foster a vibrant community life in neighbourhoods and villages, characterized by such a keen sense of purpose, was only made possible by crucial developments that occurred over the past decade in that aspect of Bahá’í culture which pertains to deepening.

When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá’í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá’í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-

growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly over the next year so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.

If the work of the tutor is to reach higher and higher degrees of excellence, it must be remembered that primary responsibility for the development of human resources in a region or country rests with the training institute. While striving to increase the number of its participants, the institute as a structure—from the board, to the coordinators at different levels, to the tutors at the grassroots—must lay equal stress on the effectiveness of the system in its entirety, for, in the final analysis, sustained quantitative

gains will be contingent on qualitative progress. At the level of the cluster, the coordinator must bring both practical experience and dynamism to his or her efforts to accompany those who serve as tutors. He or she should arrange periodic gatherings for them to reflect on their endeavours. Events organized to repeat the study of segments selected from the institute material may occasionally prove helpful, provided they do not inculcate a need for perpetual training. The capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans, through study of the sequence of courses and implementation of their practical component. And as men and women of various ages move along the sequence and complete their study of each course with the help of tutors, others must stand ready to accompany them in acts of service undertaken according to their strengths and interests—particularly the coordinators responsible for children's classes, for junior youth groups and for study circles, acts of service crucial to the perpetuation of the system itself. To ensure that the proper measure of vitality is pulsating through this system should continue to be the object of intense learning in every country over the course of the next twelve months.

Concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá'í community, a concern that resulted in two, coexisting realities. One, emulating the achievements of the Bahá'ís of Iran, was characterized by the capacity to offer systematic classes, from grade to grade, to children from Bahá'í families, generally with the aim of imparting basic knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith to rising generations. In most parts of the world, the number who benefited from such classes has been relatively small. The other reality emerged in areas where large-scale enrolments took place, both rural and urban. A more inclusive attitude dominated that experience. Yet while children from households of all kinds were at once eager and welcome to attend Bahá'í classes, various factors prevented lessons from being conducted with the required degree of regularity, year after year. How pleased we are to see this duality, a consequence of historical circumstances, begin to fall away as friends trained by institutes everywhere strive to offer classes, open to all, on a systematic basis.

Such promising beginnings have now to be vigorously pursued. In every cluster with an intensive programme of growth in operation, efforts need to be made to systematize further the provision of spiritual education to increasing numbers of children, from families of many backgrounds—a requisite of the community-building process gathering momentum in neighbourhoods and villages. This will be a demanding task, one that calls for patience and cooperation on the part of parents and institutions alike. The Ruhi Institute has already been requested to expedite plans to complete its courses for training children's class teachers at different levels including the corresponding lessons, starting with youngsters aged 5 or 6 and proceeding to those aged 10 or 11, in order to close the present gap between existing lessons and its textbooks for junior youth, such as *Spirit of Faith* and the forthcoming *Power of the Holy Spirit*, which provide a distinctly Bahá'í component to the programme for that age group. As these additional courses and lessons become available, institutes in every country will be able to prepare the teachers and the coordinators required to put in place, grade by grade, the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements can be organized. Meanwhile, institutes should do their best to provide teachers with suitable materials, from among others currently in existence, for use in their classes with children of various ages, as necessary.

The International Teaching Centre has earned our abiding gratitude for the vital impetus it lent to the efforts to secure the early attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan. To see the degree of energy it brought to this worldwide enterprise, following so tenaciously the progress in every continent and collaborating so closely with the Continental Counsellors, was to catch a glimpse of the tremendous

power inherent in the Administrative Order. As the Teaching Centre now turns its attention with equal vigour to questions related to the efficacy of activities at the cluster level, it will no doubt give special consideration to the implementation of Bahá'í children's classes. We are confident that its analysis of the experience gained in a few selected clusters this coming year, representative of diverse social realities, will shed light on practical issues which will make possible the establishment of regular classes, for children of every age, in neighbourhoods and villages.

The rapid spread of the programme for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is yet another expression of cultural advance in the Bahá'í community. While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community—in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts—is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Account after account, in which junior youth in countries all over the planet give voice to their thoughts as participants in the programme, testifies to the validity of this vision. There is every indication that the programme engages their expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyse the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives. At an age when burgeoning intellectual, spiritual and physical powers become accessible to them, they are being given the tools needed to combat the forces that would rob them of their true identity as noble beings and to work for the common good.

That the major component of the programme explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the programme enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the Holy Land. Already the accumulating body of knowledge and experience has given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the programme. To help others advance swiftly in this direction, the Office is establishing a network of sites in all continents, with the assistance of a corps of believers, that can be used to provide training to coordinators from scores upon scores of clusters. These resource persons continue to support coordinators upon their return to their respective clusters, enabling them to create a spiritually charged environment in which the junior youth programme can take root.

Further knowledge is sure to accrue in this area of endeavour, although a pattern of action is already clear. Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the programme by schools and civic groups. Within the clusters that today are the focus of an intensive programme of growth, there is a wide array of circumstances, from those with a few sporadic junior youth groups to those maintaining a number sufficient to require the services of a dedicated coordinator, who could receive ongoing support from a site for the dissemination of learning. To ensure that this capacity increases across the entire spectrum of these clusters, we are calling for 32 learning sites, each serving some twenty clusters with full-time coordinators, to be in operation by the end of the current Plan. In all other such clusters, priority should be given to creating the capacity over the coming year to offer the programme, multiplying the number of groups systematically.

The developments we have mentioned thus far—the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life, the efflorescence of an approach to study of the writings that is wedded to action, the renewal of commitment to provide spiritual education to the young in neighbourhoods and villages on a regular basis, and the spread in influence of a programme that instils in junior youth the sense of a twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society—are all reinforced, in no small measure, by yet another advance at the level of culture, the implications of which are far-reaching indeed. This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.

In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labour together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their thoughts are centred at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe, propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side.

Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community’s mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children’s class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá’í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfil these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

The development that we are sure to witness in Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyse the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical, fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.

Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programmes of growth.

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Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both

outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.

In our Riḍván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labour at the level of the cluster, they would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavour. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels, are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual

Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavours are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. That the world civilization now on humanity's horizon must achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life is central to the Bahá'í teachings. Clearly this ideal has profound implications for the nature of any social action pursued by Bahá'ís, whatever its scope and range of influence. Though conditions will vary from country to country, and perhaps from cluster to cluster, eliciting from the friends a variety of endeavours, there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression; it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighbourhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings—seeing in their fellow human beings gems of inestimable value and recognizing the effects of the dual process of integration and disintegration on both hearts and minds, as well as on social structures.

Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighbourhoods.

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrolments. Though endeavours in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of

the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances.

In describing for you these new opportunities now opening at the level of the cluster, we are not asking you to alter in any way your current course. Nor should it be imagined that such opportunities represent an alternative arena of service, competing with the expansion and consolidation work for the community's limited resources and energies. Over the coming year, the institute process and the pattern of activity that it engenders should continue to be strengthened, and teaching should remain uppermost in the mind of every believer. Further involvement in the life of society should not be sought prematurely. It will proceed naturally as the friends in every cluster persevere in applying the provisions of the Plan through a process of action, reflection, consultation and study, and learn as a result. Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning.

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Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of suffering out of His love for humanity? Look within your own ranks, at your dear Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. Do they not exemplify fortitude born of the love of God and the desire to serve Him? Does not their capacity to transcend the cruelest and most bitter persecution bespeak the capacity of millions upon millions of oppressed people of the world to arise and take a decisive part in building the Kingdom of God on earth? Undeterred by divisive social constructs, press on and bring Bahá'u'lláh's message to waiting souls in every urban neighbourhood, in every rural hamlet, in every corner of the globe, drawing them to His community, the community of the Greatest Name. Never do you leave our thoughts and prayers, and we will continue to implore the Almighty to reinforce you with His wondrous grace.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

29 August 2010

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s departure one hundred years ago from Haifa for Port Said signalled the opening of a glorious new chapter in the annals of the Faith. He was not to return to the Holy Land for three years. Referring to that historic moment the Guardian would later write: “The establishment of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh in the Western Hemisphere—the most outstanding achievement that will forever be associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry—had ... set in motion such tremendous forces, and been productive of such far-reaching results, as to warrant the active and personal participation of the Centre of the Covenant Himself....” With the inauguration of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels to the West, the Cause of Bahá’u’lláh, hemmed in for more than half a century by the hosts of enmity and oppression, burst its restraints. For the first time since its inception, the recognized Head of the Faith enjoyed a freedom of action to pursue unencumbered its divinely prescribed mission.

By any earthly measure, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would have seemed ill prepared to carry out the task before Him. He was sixty-six years old, an exile since childhood, with no formal schooling, a prisoner for forty years, in failing health, and unfamiliar with Western customs and languages. Yet He arose, without thought of comfort, undeterred by the risks involved, and utterly reliant upon divine assistance, to champion the Cause of God. He interacted with diverse peoples in nine countries on three continents. The scope and intensity of His tireless exertions were such as to “dumbfound His followers in East and West with admiration and wonder” and to “exercise an imperishable influence” on the course of the Faith’s future.

Over the next few years, Bahá'ís around the world will joyously call to mind the many episodes associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s historic journey. But this anniversary is more than a time for commemoration. The words uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse. We should, therefore, reflect not only upon what the Master achieved and set in motion but also on the work that remains undone to which He has summoned us. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, He expressed His inmost longing:

O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá” in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.

Nearly a century has passed since these words were recorded. Stage after stage of the Divine Plan has been successfully prosecuted. The Faith has been established in all corners of the world. We are present in those places that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá yearned to visit. Individuals, communities, and institutions are now endowed with the capacity necessary for systematic, sustained, and coherent action. During this precious period of remembrance, then, let each and every one of His faithful lovers arise and act in His

Name. Let them offer their share, no matter how humble, to the progress of the Plan He authored—that priceless and everlasting bequest.

[signed: 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 Ridván 2011 to Ridván 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 Ridván 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 Ridván 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 Ridván 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 Ridván 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 Ridván 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.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 January 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

For the past five days, the Continental Counsellors have been gathered in conference in the Holy Land, engaged in earnest deliberation at once insightful and clear visioned, well grounded and confident, on the progress of the Divine Plan. The joy and wonder of this gathering, now entering its closing moments, has come from the vivid retelling of your numerous exploits, deeds which secured the astonishing attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan one year early. It is hard to express in words how much love for you has been shown in these few, fleeting days. We praise God that He has raised up a community so accomplished and render thanks to Him for releasing your marvellous potentialities. You it is who, whether in collective endeavours or individual efforts, are presenting the verities of the Faith and assisting souls to recognize the Blessed Beauty. You it is who, in your tens of thousands, are serving as tutors of study circles wherever receptivity is kindled. You it is who, without thought of self, are providing spiritual education to the child and kindly fellowship to the junior youth. You it is who, through visits to homes and invitations to yours, are forging ties of spiritual kinship that foster a sense of community. You it is who, when called to serve on the institutions and agencies of the Cause, are accompanying others and rejoicing in their achievements. And it is all of us, whatever our share in this undertaking, who labour and long, strive and supplicate for the transformation of humanity, envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh, to be hastened.

A new five-year horizon now beckons, rich with portent. The features of the Plan that will begin this Riḍván are set out in a letter we addressed to the Counsellors Conference at its opening session and which was transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies the same day. We hope that you will be able to give it thoughtful study, alongside the message we addressed to you at Riḍván 2010, at gatherings of all kinds—whether at the national, regional, or cluster level, in local communities, in neighbourhoods and villages, or in the home. We are certain that, through the consultations about the Plan in which you participate, your understanding will deepen and, conscious of the spiritual forces that support you, you will resolve to make this global enterprise a personal concern and become as occupied with the well-being of the human family as you are with that of your dearest kin. It brings us great joy that so many souls throughout the Bahá'í community are ready to thus distinguish themselves. But what gratifies us beyond this is the certain knowledge that victories will be won in the next five years by youth and adults, men and women, who may at present be wholly unaware of Bahá'u'lláh's coming, much less acquainted with the “society-building power” of His Faith. For you possess a potent instrument for spiritually empowering the masses of humanity to take charge of their own destiny, an instrument tempered in the crucible of experience. You know well, and have heard clearly, the call of Bahá'u'lláh: “I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight.”

Our abiding prayers are with each of you.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

At the opening of this glorious season our eyes are brightened as we behold the newly unveiled brilliance of the gilded dome that crowns the exalted Shrine of the Báb. Restored to the supernal lustre intended for it by Shoghi Effendi, that august edifice once again shines out to land, sea, and sky, by day and by night, attesting the majesty and holiness of Him Whose hallowed remains are embosomed within.

This moment of joy synchronizes with the close of an auspicious chapter in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Only a single decade remains of the first century of the Formative Age, the first hundred years to be spent beneath the benevolent shade of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Five Year Plan now ending is succeeded by another, the features of which have already been made the object of intense study across the Bahá'í world. Indeed, we could not be more gratified by the response to our message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and to the Riḍván message of twelve months ago. Not satisfied with a fragmentary grasp of their contents, the friends are returning to these messages again and again, singly and in groups, at formal meetings and spontaneous gatherings. Their understanding is enriched through active and informed participation in the programmes of growth being nurtured in their clusters. Consequently, the Bahá'í community worldwide has consciously absorbed in a few months what it needs to propel it into a confident start to the coming decade.

Over the same period, cumulative instances of political upheaval and economic turmoil on various continents have shaken governments and peoples. Societies have been brought to the brink of revolution, and in notable cases over the edge. Leaders are finding that neither arms nor riches guarantee security. Where the aspirations of the people have gone unfulfilled, a store of indignation has accrued. We recall how pointedly Bahá'u'lláh admonished the rulers of the earth: "Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber." A word of caution: No matter how captivating the spectacle of the people's fervour for change, it must be remembered that there are interests which manipulate the course of events. And, so long as the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician is not administered, the tribulations of this age will persist and deepen. An attentive observer of the times will readily recognize the accelerated disintegration, fitful but relentless, of a world order lamentably defective.

Yet, discernible too is its counterpart, the constructive process that the Guardian associated with "the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" and described as "the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish." Its indirect effects can be seen in the outpouring of feeling, especially from the young, that springs from a longing to contribute to societal development. It is a bounty accorded to the followers of the Ancient Beauty that this longing, which wells up inexorably from the human spirit in every land, is able to find such eloquent expression in the work the Bahá'í community is carrying out to build capacity for effective action amongst the diverse populations of the planet. Can any privilege compare with this?

For insight into this work let every believer look to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the centenary of Whose “epoch-making journeys” to Egypt and the West is being marked at this time. Tirelessly, He expounded the teachings in every social space: in homes and mission halls, churches and synagogues, parks and public squares, railway carriages and ocean liners, clubs and societies, schools and universities.

Uncompromising in defence of the truth, yet infinitely gentle in manner, He brought the universal divine principles to bear on the exigencies of the age. To all without distinction—officials, scientists, workers, children, parents, exiles, activists, clerics, sceptics—He imparted love, wisdom, comfort, whatever the particular need. While elevating their souls, He challenged their assumptions, reoriented their perspectives, expanded their consciousness, and focused their energies. He demonstrated by word and deed such compassion and generosity that hearts were utterly transformed. No one was turned away. Our great hope is that frequent recollection, during this centennial period, of the Master’s matchless record will inspire and fortify His sincere admirers. Set His example before your eyes and fix your gaze upon it; let it be your instinctive guide in your pursuit of the aim of the Plan.

At the inception of the Bahá’í community’s first global Plan, Shoghi Effendi described in compelling language the successive stages by which the divine light had been kindled in the Síyáh-Chál, clothed in the lamp of revelation in Baghdád, spread to countries in Asia and Africa even as it shone with added brilliancy in Adrianople and later in ‘Akká, projected across the seas to the remaining continents, and by which it would be progressively diffused over the states and dependencies of the world. The final part of this process he characterized as the “penetration of that light ... into all the remaining territories of the globe”, referring to it as “the stage at which the light of God’s triumphant Faith shining in all its power and glory will have suffused and enveloped the entire planet.” Though that goal is far from being fulfilled, the light already blazes intensely in many a region. In some countries it shines in every cluster. In the land where that inextinguishable light was first ignited, it burns bright despite those who would snuff it out. In diverse nations it achieves a steady glow across whole neighbourhoods and villages, as candle after candle in heart after heart is lighted by the Hand of Providence; it illuminates thoughtful conversation at every level of human interaction; it casts its beams upon a myriad initiatives taken to promote the well-being of a people. And in every instance it radiates from a faithful believer, a vibrant community, a loving Spiritual Assembly—each a beacon of light against the gloom.

We pray earnestly at the Sacred Threshold that each one of you, bearers of the undying flame, may be surrounded by the potent confirmations of Bahá’u’lláh as you convey to others the spark of faith.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

23 May 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Our message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors briefly described the process of growth which begins to unfold in a cluster, frequently as the result of a single homefront pioneer entering into meaningful conversation with local residents. We also indicated that more advanced clusters, in which the pattern of action associated with an intensive programme of growth has been firmly established, will often serve as reservoirs of pioneers who can be dispatched to other clusters, especially on the home front – in some to initiate a systematic approach to sharing Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and in others to strengthen the processes of expansion and consolidation that have already been established. There is no doubt that the movement of pioneers remains an indispensable feature of the spiritual enterprise in which the community of the Most Great Name is engaged.

During the Five Year Plan recently concluded, over 3,500 international pioneers entered the arena of service to reinforce the work of the Faith in myriad ways across the globe. At the same time, we were most pleased to see a surge in the movement of homefront pioneers, their numbers matching those who arose to serve in the international field and their sacrificial efforts making a distinctive contribution to the early attainment of the goal of the Plan. In the next five years, the successful prosecution of the Plan will require the services of several thousand consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programmes of growth.

National Spiritual Assemblies, in close collaboration with Continental Counsellors and Continental Pioneering Committees, will continue to play a crucial role in expanding the awareness of the believers about the critical needs of the Cause and in assisting with the settlement of pioneers in designated clusters. They will not, however, be asked to establish numerical goals at the outset, as was the practice in the past, for those to be dispatched beyond their borders during the coming five years. Rather, we will regularly call the attention of selected National Assemblies in different parts of the world to specific urgent pioneer needs, identified by the International Teaching Centre in the course of its ongoing endeavours to follow the progress of the Faith around the globe. It is hoped that National Assemblies will then be able to quickly send pioneers who respond to that particular appeal. In this regard, a promising pattern is developing in certain regions whereby believers arise to serve in a neighbouring country or in one that is further afield but within the same continent. This development brings with it the advantage of a more intimate familiarity with the culture and language of the country in which they settle, thereby increasing their effectiveness and the efficiency with which their services can be utilized.

Beyond responding to the specific appeals for homefront and international pioneers that are issued from time to time by the institutions, the friends are of course welcome to arise at any time and from any place to settle in any area where they feel they can best contribute to the advancement of the Cause. Even so, their endeavours would yield greater effect if, drawing on the advice of institutions, they were

to direct their efforts to clusters – indeed, villages and neighbourhoods within clusters--that are the focus of systematic attention.

It is our ardent hope that the believers will arise rank upon rank, with a clarity of vision born of experience and with complete reliance on the confirmations of God, to offer His life-giving Message to every eager soul, to every receptive population. Our prayers at the Sacred Threshold will accompany them as they strive to seize the abundant opportunities now opening before them.

The Universal House of Justice

12 December 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

Across the globe Bahá'í communities are intently engaged in executing the provisions of the Five Year Plan. Its opening months now behind us, there is every indication that the study of recent guidance and deliberations on the nature and extent of capacity developed thus far are bearing fruit in focused, highly unified action at the grassroots. Principally through the efforts of homefront pioneers, in several hundred newly opened clusters, the first stirrings of a programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can already be felt, while in several hundred more, further along the continuum of growth, a pattern of rigorous activity is taking hold. Meanwhile the friends in those clusters in the forefront of learning are gaining mastery over the dynamics that characterize rapidly expanding, relatively large communities.

In this connection, we are particularly happy to note the degree of effort being exerted in every country to lend an added measure of vitality to the institute process, so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order. The operation of the institute board; the functioning of coordinators at different levels; the capabilities of friends serving as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, teachers of children's classes; and the promotion of an environment conducive at once to universal participation and mutual support and assistance—nowhere is the centrality of these to the fulfilment of the community's God-given mission lost on the friends. What has been especially heartening to observe in this respect is the widespread mobilization of resources dedicated to the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. No less encouraging is the zeal with which institutes have greeted the challenge of preparing teachers for successive grades of Bahá'í children's classes as additional materials for this purpose have been made available. It seems timely, then, to offer National Spiritual Assemblies and their training institutes further guidance on the implementation of the main sequence of courses and those that branch off from it.

The path of service

A number of years ago, to aid the believers in thinking about the process of growth at the level of the cluster, we introduced the concept of two complementary movements. The progress of a steady, ever-widening stream of individuals through the courses of the institute represents one of these. It is not only responsible for giving impetus to the other—the development of the cluster, discernable in the collective capacity to manifest a pattern of life in conformity with the teachings of the Faith—but also dependent on it for its own perpetuation. It was in view of mounting evidence of the effects of the Ruhi Institute curriculum on these two mutually reinforcing movements that we recommended its adoption worldwide six years ago. At the time, we did not comment specifically on the pedagogical principles governing the curriculum; nevertheless, it should be apparent to the friends that the curriculum possesses desirable characteristics, some of which have been described in broad terms in our messages regarding the current series of global Plans. Of particular significance is its organizing principle:

developing capacity to serve the Cause and humanity in a process likened to walking a path of service. This conception shapes both content and structure.

The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.

At present the main sequence consists of eight courses, though it is understood there may eventually be as many as eighteen that will address acts of service related to such requirements as coordination and administration, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. There are currently two points along the sequence at which an individual may choose to follow a specialized path of service. The first appears at Book 3. From among the friends who complete it and begin to offer a relatively simple class for children in the first grade of a programme for their spiritual education, a percentage will want to dedicate themselves to this field of service, pursuing in time a series of progressively more complex branch courses for teaching Grades 2 to 6. This does not mean that they will abandon study of the main sequence. Indeed, courses that make up a specialized path of service anticipate that participants are continuing to progress, each at a pace suitable to his or her situation, along the path traced out by the main sequence. Book 5, which seeks to raise up animators of junior youth groups, constitutes the second point at which a series of courses branch out.

Additional avenues of exploration will no doubt appear along the main sequence in due time. Some may be of universal interest, such as the two mentioned above, while others may be limited to specific local needs. As with the main sequence itself, content and structure must emerge out of continued collective experience in the field, an experience that is not haphazard or subject to the forces of personal preference but is guided by the institutions of the Faith. The generation of such an experience will call for a still greater infusion of energy from a much larger portion of the population, and it would be premature, in all but a few places, for institutes to give attention to the creation or implementation of other branch courses at this juncture in the unfoldment of the current series of global Plans.

Coordination

Clearly, the approach to capacity building described above represents an attempt to achieve a certain dynamics within a population that brings together service and the generation of knowledge and its diffusion, a subject which we discussed, albeit briefly, in our Riḍván 2010 message. Here we address a few practical considerations, which the emergence of the two aforementioned specialized paths of service has made all the more relevant.

At any given moment it is possible to view from one of two perspectives what occurs in a cluster as the pattern of action promoted by the Five Year Plan, through which is woven the fabric of a vibrant community life, gathers in strength. Both perspectives are equally valid; each offers a particular way of

thinking and speaking about what is taking place. From one perspective an educational process with three distinct stages appears in sharp relief: the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults. In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.

From another perspective one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan. The question of teaching among receptive populations moves to the foreground in this light, and the challenge of seeking out souls who are willing to engage in a conversation about the world around them and participate in a collective effort to transform it comes into focus.

It is especially at the level of coordination that it proves indispensable to step back and view from these two vantage points what is essentially one reality. Doing so makes it possible to analyse accurately, to assess strategically, to allocate wisely, and to avoid fragmentation. At this point, then, early in the execution of the Plan, it seems more vital than ever for attention to be devoted to the issue of coordination. Though the basic elements of an effective organizational scheme are already well understood, the form it should assume under diverse circumstances is in need of articulation. We have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow efforts made in this direction, particularly in the several hundred furthest advanced clusters worldwide, in order to effect the rapid systematization of lessons learned.

In all such clusters, where the demands of large-scale growth are asserting themselves, each stage of the educational process promoted by the training institute must receive added support. The work of the coordinator should be reinforced by assistance from a growing number of experienced individuals, and meetings for the exchange of information and insights become regular and more systematic in approach. So, too, must periodic occasions be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children's classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole. And they, in turn, should meet on a regular basis with the Area Teaching Committee. Further, if an adequate flow of information, guidance and much-needed funds is to reach the cluster, a parallel set of steps will have to be taken by the board of the institute to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.

One final point merits reflection in this respect. Nearly all of the several hundred clusters under consideration are associated with one or another of some forty sites for the dissemination of learning established by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre in response to the overwhelming demand for the junior youth programme experienced throughout the world. Institutes operating in these clusters have already benefited over the past year from knowledge gained through

the sites, particularly in relation to coordination of the programme. Without question, the capacity to sustain scores of junior youth groups lent a powerful impetus to the progress of all such clusters and contributed decisively to the subsequent development of study circles and children's classes. Sites supported by the Office of Social and Economic Development will continue to assist training institutes in addressing the complex set of questions arising out of the implementation of a programme for an age group whose enormous potential must remain the object of ongoing exploration. We look to the institutes themselves, however, to foster the learning process necessary to manage large numbers of children's classes and study circles, to put in place a scheme at the cluster level that will strengthen coordination across their three defined areas of action, and to open the flow of resources from the regional level into the grassroots—this, to ensure the seamless progression of sizeable contingents from one stage of the educational process to the next and to facilitate the steady unfoldment of cycles of activity so essential to systematic growth.

Classes for children

Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses. The units that comprise the three books currently available contain both materials for study by teachers and lessons for children, allowing institutes to establish without delay the first three grades of a six-year programme. To raise up an initial corps of teachers for these grades, they may well have to employ temporary measures. A good scheme of coordination, built incrementally in keeping with demands on the ground, should make it possible to respond to exigencies with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the integrity of the overall educational process in the long term.

Besides the systematic training of teachers for successive grades, institutes will need to learn about the formation of classes for distinct age groups in villages and neighbourhoods; the provision of teachers for various classes; the retention of students year after year, grade after grade; and the continued progress of children from a wide variety of households and backgrounds—in short, the establishment of an expanding, sustainable system for child education that will keep pace with both the growing concern among parents for their youngsters to develop sound moral structures and the rise in human resources in the community. The task, while immense, is relatively straightforward, and we urge institutes everywhere to give it the attention which it so clearly deserves, focusing especially on the implementation of the first three grades of the programme and remembering that the quality of the teaching-learning experience depends, to a great extent, on the capabilities of the teacher.

A word of caution seems to be in order. It is certainly not incorrect to speak of “training” children's class teachers or, for that matter, animators of junior youth groups. Institutes, however, ought to take care, lest they begin to perceive their work as training in techniques, losing sight of the conception of capacity building at the heart of the institute process that entails a profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation.

Educational materials

In light of the foregoing paragraphs, the question of educational materials specifically as they pertain to children's classes and to junior youth groups has to be considered. With regard to the former, we explained in our Riḍván 2010 message that the lessons prepared by the Ruhi Institute would constitute the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements

could be organized. Whether or not any additional elements are required to reinforce the educational process for each grade would generally be determined by teachers themselves, on the basis of specific circumstances, not infrequently in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level. It is assumed that, if found to be appropriate, any additional items would be selected from resources readily available. There will seldom be cause to formalize the use of such items, whether directly through their adoption by training institutes or indirectly through their widespread systematic promotion.

In the case of junior youth groups, a similar approach is encouraged by the Office of Social and Economic Development. The core of the programme consists of a series of textbooks studied by the groups. We understand that, at present, seven of a projected eighteen textbooks, exploring a range of themes from a Bahá'í perspective, though not in the mode of religious instruction, are available. These form the major component of a three-year programme. Another nine textbooks will provide a distinctly Bahá'í component, and two of these are currently in use. Animators are advised to complement study with artistic activities and service projects. As with children's class teachers, the institute coordinator at the cluster level can offer animators assistance in determining how to proceed. Yet, most often, such projects and activities are selected by the junior youth themselves, in light of their own circumstances and inclinations, in consultation with the group's animator.

In all such matters, those serving as teachers and animators alike are called upon to exercise discretion. Education is a vast field, and educational theories abound. Surely many have considerable merit, but it should be remembered that none is free of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. An educational process should, for example, create in a child awareness of his or her potentialities, but the glorification of self has to be scrupulously avoided. So often in the name of building confidence the ego is bolstered. Similarly, play has its place in the education of the young. Children and junior youth, however, have proven time and again their capacity to engage in discussions on abstract subjects, undertaken at a level appropriate to their age, and derive great joy from the serious pursuit of understanding. An educational process that dilutes content in a mesmerizing sea of entertainment does them no service. We trust that, in studying the institute courses, teachers and animators will find themselves increasingly equipped to make judicious decisions in selecting any materials or activities necessary, whether from traditional educational sources or from the wealth of items, such as songs, stories, and games, that are sure to be developed for the young in the Bahá'í community in the years to come.

Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works. It is with such considerations in mind that we welcome the decision of the Ruhi Institute, in formulating its courses, to leave for the friends to address locally issues related to artistic activity. What we ask at this stage, then, when energies are to be invested in the extension of children's classes and junior youth groups, is that the multiplication of supplementary items for this purpose be allowed to occur naturally, as an outgrowth of the process of community building gathering momentum in villages and neighbourhoods. We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every

language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted. Further, every effort should be made to protect spiritual education from the perils of commercialization. The Ruhi Institute itself has explicitly discouraged the proliferation of products and items that treat its identity as a brand to be marketed. We hope that the friends will respect its diligence in this matter.

In this connection, it gives us pleasure to inform you that we have created an International Advisory Board to assist the Ruhi Institute in overseeing its system for the preparation, production, and distribution of materials, the content and structure of which now draw extensively on Bahá'í experience worldwide in applying the teachings and principles of the Faith to the life of humanity. As it gradually takes up its work, the Board will be able to respond to related issues and follow the development of supplementary materials that are aligned with the direction set by the global Plans.

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In closing, we feel compelled to address a few words to training institutes throughout the world: It should be remembered that the Bahá'í children's class teacher and the junior youth group animator, entrusted with so much responsibility for strengthening the moral foundations of the community, will, in most places, be a young person in his or her teens. Increasingly these young people will emerge, it can be expected, from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme imbued with a strong twofold purpose, both to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society. But they may also come from any one of a number of educational backgrounds with all the hope in their hearts that, through strenuous concerted effort, the world will change. Irrespective of particulars, they will, one and all, share in the desire to dedicate their time and energy, talents and abilities, to service to their communities. Many, when given the opportunity, will gladly devote a few years of their lives to the provision of spiritual education to the rising generations. In the young people of the world, then, lies a reservoir of capacity to transform society waiting to be tapped. And the release of this capacity should be regarded by every institute as a sacred charge.

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 2012

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Midafternoon on the eleventh day of the Riḍván festival one hundred years ago, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, standing before an audience several hundred strong, lifted a workman’s axe and pierced the turf covering the Temple site at Grosse Pointe, north of Chicago. Those invited to break the ground with Him on that spring day came from diverse backgrounds—Norwegian, Indian, French, Japanese, Persian, indigenous American, to name but a few. It was as if the House of Worship, yet unbuilt, was fulfilling the wishes of the Master, expressed on the eve of the ceremony, for every such edifice: “that humanity might find a place of meeting” and “that the proclamation of the oneness of mankind shall go forth from its open courts of holiness”.

His listeners on that occasion, and all who heard Him in the course of His travels to Egypt and the West, must have but dimly comprehended the far-reaching implications of His words for society, for its values and preoccupations. Still today, can anyone claim to have glimpsed anything but an intimation, distant and indistinct, of the future society to which the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is destined to give rise? For let none suppose that the civilization towards which the divine teachings impel humankind will follow merely from adjustments to the present order. Far from it. In a talk delivered some days after He laid the cornerstone of the Mother Temple of the West, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated that “among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form,” that “the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs”. These, and countless other utterances of the Master to which the Bahá’í community is turning time and again in this centennial period, raise awareness of the distance that separates society as it is now arranged from the stupendous vision His Father gifted to the world.

Alas, notwithstanding the laudable efforts, in every land, of well-intentioned individuals working to improve circumstances in society, the obstacles preventing the realization of such a vision seem insurmountable to many. Their hopes founder on erroneous assumptions about human nature that so permeate the structures and traditions of much of present-day living as to have attained the status of established fact. These assumptions appear to make no allowance for the extraordinary reservoir of spiritual potential available to any illumined soul who draws upon it; instead, they rely for justification on humanity’s failings, examples of which daily reinforce a common sense of despair. A layered veil of false premises thus obscures a fundamental truth: The state of the world reflects a distortion of the human spirit, not its essential nature. The purpose of every Manifestation of God is to effect a transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humanity. And this transformation naturally occurs as a growing body of people, united by the divine precepts, collectively seeks to develop spiritual capacities to contribute to a process of societal change. Akin to the hard earth struck by the Master a century ago, the prevailing theories of the age may, at first, seem impervious to alteration, but they will undoubtedly fade away, and through the “vernal showers of the bounty of God”, the “flowers of true understanding” will spring up fresh and fair.

We yield thanks to God that, through the potency of His Word, you—the community of His Greatest Name—are cultivating environments wherein true understanding can blossom. Even those enduring imprisonment for the Faith are, by their untold sacrifice and steadfastness, enabling the “hyacinths of knowledge and wisdom” to flower in sympathetic hearts. Across the globe, eager souls are being engaged in the work of constructing a new world through the systematic implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan. So well have its features been grasped that we feel no need to comment further on them here. Our supplications, offered at the Threshold of an All-Bountiful Providence, are for the assistance of the Supreme Concourse to be vouchsafed to every one of you in contributing to the progress of the Plan. Our fervent desire, bolstered by witnessing your consecrated efforts during the past year, is that you will intensify your sure-footed application of the knowledge you are acquiring through experience. Now is not the time to hold back; too many remain unaware of the new dawn. Who but you can convey the divine message? “By God,” Bahá’u’lláh, referring to the Cause, affirms, “this is the arena of insight and detachment, of vision and upliftment, where none may spur on their chargers save the valiant horsemen of the Merciful, who have severed all attachment to the world of being.”

To observe the Bahá’í world at work is to behold a vista bright indeed. In the life of the individual believer who desires, above all, to invite others into communion with the Creator and to render service to humanity can be found signs of the spiritual transformation intended for every soul by the Lord of the Age. In the spirit animating the activities of any Bahá’í community dedicated to enhancing the capacity of its members young and old, as well as of its friends and collaborators, to serve the common weal can be perceived an indication of how a society founded upon divine teachings might develop. And in those advanced clusters where activity governed by the framework of the Plan is in abundance and the demands of ensuring coherence amongst lines of action are most pressing, the evolving administrative structures offer glimmerings, however faint, of how the institutions of the Faith will incrementally come to assume a fuller range of their responsibilities to promote human welfare and progress. Clearly, then, the development of the individual, the community, and the institutions holds immense promise. But beyond this, we note with particular joy how the relationships binding these three are marked by such tender affection and mutual support.

By contrast, relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large—the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society—reflect the discord that characterizes humanity’s turbulent stage of transition. Unwilling to act as interdependent parts of an organic whole, they are locked in a struggle for power which ultimately proves futile. How very different the society which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in unnumbered Tablets and talks, depicts—where everyday interactions, as much as the relations of states, are shaped by consciousness of the oneness of humankind. Relationships imbued with this consciousness are being cultivated by Bahá’ís and their friends in villages and neighbourhoods across the world; from them can be detected the pure fragrances of reciprocity and cooperation, of concord and love. Within such unassuming settings, a visible alternative to society’s familiar strife is emerging. So it becomes apparent that the individual who wishes to exercise self-expression responsibly participates thoughtfully in consultation devoted to the common good and spurns the temptation to insist on personal opinion; a Bahá’í institution, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aims not to control but to nurture and encourage; the community that is to take charge of its own development recognizes an invaluable asset in the unity afforded through whole-hearted engagement in the plans devised by the institutions. Under the influence of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, the relationships among these three are being endowed with new warmth, new life; in

aggregate, they constitute a matrix within which a world spiritual civilization, bearing the imprint of divine inspiration, gradually matures.

The light of the Revelation is destined to illumine every sphere of endeavour; in each, the relationships that sustain society are to be recast; in each, the world seeks examples of how human beings should be to one another. We offer for your consideration, given its conspicuous part in generating the ferment in which so many people have recently been embroiled, the economic life of humanity, where injustice is tolerated with indifference and disproportionate gain is regarded as the emblem of success. So deeply entrenched are such pernicious attitudes that it is hard to imagine how any one individual can alone alter the prevailing standards by which the relationships in this domain are governed. Nevertheless, there are certainly practices a Bahá'í would eschew, such as dishonesty in one's transactions or the economic exploitation of others. Faithful adherence to the divine admonitions demands there be no contradiction between one's economic conduct and one's beliefs as a Bahá'í. By applying in one's life those principles of the Faith that relate to fairness and equity, a single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself. Humanity is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire; we look to you to foster communities whose ways will give hope to the world.

In our Ridván message of 2001, we indicated that in countries where the process of entry by troops was sufficiently well advanced and conditions in national communities were favourable, we would approve the establishment of Houses of Worship at the national level, whose emergence would become a feature of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith. With exceeding joy we now announce that national Mashriqu'l-Adhikárs are to be raised up in two countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea. In these, the criteria we set are demonstrably met, and the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable. With the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago under way, the initiation of projects for building national Houses of Worship offers yet another gratifying evidence of the penetration of the Faith of God into the soil of society.

One more step is possible. The Mashriqu'l-Adhikár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "one of the most vital institutions of the world", weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. The union of these two is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the Plan, particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. The correlation of worship and service is especially pronounced in those clusters around the world where Bahá'í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in social action is apparent. Some of these have been designated as sites for the dissemination of learning so as to nurture the friends' ability to advance the junior youth programme in associated regions. The capacity to sustain this programme, as we have recently indicated, also fuels the development of study circles and children's classes. Thus, beyond its primary purpose, the learning site fortifies the entire scheme of expansion and consolidation. It is within these clusters that, in the coming years, the emergence of a local Mashriqu'l-Adhikár can be contemplated. Our hearts brimming with thankfulness to the Ancient Beauty, we rejoice to inform you that we are entering into consultations with respective National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the erection of the first local House of Worship in each of the following clusters: Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; and Tanna, Vanuatu.

To support the construction of the two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhikárs, we have decided to establish a Temples Fund at the Bahá'í World Centre for the benefit of all such projects. The friends everywhere are invited to contribute to it sacrificially, as their means allow.

Beloved co-workers: The ground broken by the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá a hundred years ago is to be broken again in seven more countries, this being but the prelude to the day when within every city and village, in obedience to the bidding of Bahá'u'lláh, a building is upraised for the worship of the Lord. From these Dawning-Points of the Remembrance of God will shine the rays of His light and peal out the anthems of His praise.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

8 February 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Within communities of every size and strength, we are glad to see the processes of the Five Year Plan kindling the spirit of service and stimulating purposeful action. Examples appear every day of how the act of reaching out to touch individual hearts, acquainting souls with the Word of God, and inviting them to contribute to the betterment of society can, in time, tend to the advancement of a people. This collective movement becomes discernible when the Plan's elements are combined into a well-coordinated cluster-wide effort, the dynamics of which are becoming increasingly familiar. Such a cluster becomes the setting for experienced believers as much as those newly introduced to the Faith, whatever their age or background, to work side by side, accompanying one another in their service, enabling everyone to participate in the unfoldment of the Plan.

From the panorama of the Bahá'í world engaged in earnest activity, one phenomenon strikes us especially: the decisive contribution made by youth on every continent. In this phenomenon we see the vindication of the hopes the beloved Guardian invested in them “for the future progress and expansion of the Cause” and of the confidence with which he laid upon their shoulders “all the responsibility for the upkeep of the spirit of selfless service among their fellow-believers”. We are struck, too, by the number of youth who, after only a brief association with the Bahá'í community, commit themselves to meaningful acts of service and quickly discover their affinity with the Faith's community-building endeavour. Indeed, in contemplating both the Bahá'í youth and their like-minded peers, we cannot but rejoice at their eagerness to take on a measure of responsibility to aid the spiritual and social development of those around them, especially ones younger than themselves. In an age consumed by self-interest, in which even spiritual affiliation is weighed in the scales of reward and personal satisfaction, it is heartening to encounter individuals from their mid-teens to their twenties—those upon whom the sights of an aggressive materialism are decidedly trained—who are galvanized by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and are ready to put the needs of others before their own. That such high-minded youth, by dint of their own exertions as well as the momentum they lend to the whole community, should be contributing so effectively to efforts everywhere under way bodes well for the anticipated acceleration of these efforts.

What has been accomplished in the past two years will, surely, be far surpassed, not just in the concluding years of this present Plan but in the remaining years of the first century of the Formative Age. To spur on this mighty enterprise and to summon today's youth to fully assume the responsibilities they must discharge in this fast-contracting interval, we announce the convocation of 95 youth conferences, between July and October, planned for locations that span the globe: Accra, Addis Ababa, Aguascalientes, Almaty, Antananarivo, Apia, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Bardiya, Battambang, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Boston, Brasília, Bridgetown, Bukavu, Cali, Canoas, Cartagena de Indias, Chennai, Chibombo, Chicago, Chişinău, Cochabamba, Daidanaw, Dakar, Dallas, Danané, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka, Dnipropetrovsk, Durham (United States), Frankfurt, Guwahati, Helsinki, Istanbul (2), Jakarta, Johannesburg, Kadugannawa, Kampala, Kananga, Karachi, Khujand,

Kinshasa, Kolkata, Kuching, Lae, Lima, London, Lubumbashi, Lucknow, Macau, Madrid, Manila, Matunda Soy, Moscow, Mwinilunga, Mzuzu, Nadi, Nairobi, New Delhi, Oakland, Otavalo, Ouagadougou, Panchgani, Paris, Patna, Perth, Phoenix, Port-au-Prince, Port Dickson, Port Moresby, Port-Vila, San Diego, San José (Costa Rica), San Jose City (Philippines), San Salvador, Santiago, Sapele, Sarh, Seberang Perai, South Tarawa, Sydney, Tbilisi, Thyolo, Tirana, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Verona, Yaoundé. We extend an invitation to these gatherings to every youth who recognizes in the methods and instruments of the Plan potent means for movement towards a better society. And from Bahá'ís of all ages, we invite wholehearted support for the participants upon whose efforts so much depends.

Beloved friends: To every generation of young believers comes an opportunity to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity, unique to their time of life. For the present generation, the moment has come to reflect, to commit, to steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we entreat the Ancient Beauty that, from out a distracted and bewildered humanity, He may distil pure souls endowed with clear sight: youth whose integrity and uprightness are not undermined by dwelling on the faults of others and who are not immobilized by any shortcomings of their own; youth who will look to the Master and “bring those who have been excluded into the circle of intimate friends”; youth whose consciousness of the failings of society impels them to work for its transformation, not to distance themselves from it; youth who, whatever the cost, will refuse to pass by inequity in its many incarnations and will labour, instead, that “the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world.”

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

2 March 2013

To the Bahá'ís of Iran

Dearly loved Friends,

For three and a half decades now, wave after wave of persecution, varying in intensity, has battered your sorely tried and valiant community, a barrage that is but the latest in a series unleashed over one hundred and sixty years ago. Yet, contrary to the expectations of those bent on sapping the strength of the community of Bahá'u'lláh's followers in His homeland, their machinations have served ultimately to reinforce its foundations and fortify its ranks. More and more of your compatriots, themselves victims of oppression, not only see clearly the trail of injustices that have been perpetrated against Bahá'ís down the years but also recognize in your unbroken record of disinterested service to society a force of constructive change. As sympathy towards you continues to grow, so do the voices calling for the removal of the obstacles that have prevented you from participating in the life of society in all of its dimensions. Not surprisingly, then, questions regarding the posture held by Bahá'ís everywhere towards political activity have taken on greater significance in the eyes of your fellow citizens.

Historically, of course, the position in which the Iranian Bahá'í community has found itself in this respect has been a peculiar one. It has been falsely accused, on the one hand, of being politically motivated, leagued against the prevailing regime—the agent of whatever foreign power the accuser finds most convenient to his purpose. On the other hand, the uncompromising refusal of the members of the community to participate in partisan political activity has been portrayed as a lack of concern for the affairs of the Iranian people. Now that the true intentions of your oppressors have been laid bare, it behoves you to respond to the growing interest of your fellow citizens in understanding the Bahá'í attitude towards politics, lest misconceptions be allowed to weaken the bonds of friendship you are establishing with so many souls. In this, they deserve more than a few statements, however important, that evoke images of love and unity. To assist you in conveying to them a vision of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to the subject, we are providing you with the comments below.

Inseparable from the Bahá'í perspective on politics is a particular conception of history, its course and direction. Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race. Not unlike the individual who passes through the unsettled yet promising period of adolescence, during which latent powers and capacities come to light, humankind as a whole is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.

Bahá'ís are encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honoured

institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose. Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Bahá'ís, of course, strive to align themselves, individually and collectively, with forces associated with the process of integration, which, they are confident, will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.

Such is the view of history that underlies every endeavour pursued by the Bahá'í community.

As you know from your study of the Bahá'í writings, the principle that is to infuse all facets of organized life on the planet is the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity. That humanity constitutes a single people is a truth that, once viewed with scepticism, claims widespread acceptance today. The rejection of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. Yet, however promising the rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will take decades—nay, centuries—to unfold. For the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature; the deterioration of the home environment, with the accompanying rise in the systematic exploitation of women and children worldwide, makes clear how pervasive are the misbegotten notions that define relations within the family unit; the persistence of despotism, on the one hand, and the increasing disregard for authority, on the other, reveal how unsatisfactory to a maturing humanity is the current relationship between the individual and the institutions of society; the concentration of material wealth in the hands of a minority of the world's population gives an indication of how fundamentally ill-conceived are relationships among the many sectors of what is now an emerging global community. The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society.

What should be stated plainly here is that Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation thus envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts. Nor are they trying to create a movement that would seek to impose on society their vision of the future. Every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving. Unity will progressively be achieved, as foreshadowed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in different realms of social existence, for instance, “unity in the political realm”, “unity of thought in world undertakings”, “unity of races” and the “unity of nations”. As these come to be realized, the structures of a politically united world, which respects the full diversity of culture and provides channels for the expression of dignity and honour, will gradually take shape.

The question that occupies the worldwide Bahá'í community, then, is how it can best contribute to the civilization-building process as its resources increase. It sees two dimensions to its contribution. The first is related to its own growth and development, and the second to its involvement in society at large.

Regarding the first, Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavour shoulder to shoulder with men; that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few; that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances; that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated; that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity; that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.

Numerous, of course, are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory "other" or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. To explore questions such as these and the many others certain to arise, the Bahá'í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to

devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned—these are, themselves, the object of regular examination.

The overall direction of the process of learning that the Bahá'í community is pursuing is guided by a series of global plans, the provisions of which are established by the Universal House of Justice. Capacity building is the watchword of these plans: they aim at enabling the protagonists of collective effort to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighbourhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches.

At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favour of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. Animating the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. Just as the appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through the complex association of countless cells, whose organization in tissues and organs allows for the realization of distinctive capacities, so can civilization be seen as the outcome of a set of interactions among closely integrated, diverse components which have transcended the narrow purpose of tending to their own existence. And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race. In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.

If the web of relationships alluded to above is to take shape and give rise to a pattern of life distinguished by adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind, certain foundational concepts must be carefully examined. Most notable among them is the conception of power. Clearly the concept of power as a means of domination, with the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, must be left behind. This is not to deny the operation of power; after all, even in cases where institutions of society have received their mandates through the consent of the people, power is involved in the exercise of authority. But political processes, like other processes of life, should not remain unaffected by the powers of the human spirit that the Bahá'í Faith—for that matter, every great religious tradition that has appeared throughout the ages—hopes to tap: the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds. Associated with power in this sense are words such as “release”, “encourage”, “channel”, “guide” and “enable”. Power is not a finite entity which is to be “seized” and “jealously guarded”; it constitutes a limitless capacity to transform that resides in the human race as a body.

The Bahá'í community readily acknowledges that it has a considerable distance to traverse before its growing experience yields the necessary insights into the workings of the desired set of interactions. It makes no claims to perfection. To uphold high ideals and to have become their embodiment are not one and the same. Myriad are the challenges that lie ahead, and much remains to be learned. The casual observer may well choose to label the community's attempts to surmount these challenges "idealistic". Yet it certainly would not be justified to portray Bahá'ís as uninterested in the affairs of their own countries, much less as unpatriotic. However idealistic the Bahá'í endeavour may appear to some, its deep-seated concern for the good of humankind cannot be ignored. And given that no current arrangement in the world seems capable of lifting humanity from the quagmire of conflict and contention and securing its felicity, why would any government object to the efforts of one group of people to deepen its understanding of the nature of those essential relationships inherent to the common future towards which the human race is being inexorably drawn? What harm is there in this?

Within the framework traced out by the above ideas, then, it is possible to consider the second dimension of the Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization: its involvement in society at large. Clearly what Bahá'ís see as one aspect of their contribution cannot contradict the other. They cannot be seeking to establish patterns of thought and action that give expression to the principle of oneness within their community, yet engage in activities in another context which, to whatever extent, reinforce an entirely different set of assumptions about social existence. To avoid such a duality, the Bahá'í community has progressively refined over time, on the basis of the teachings of the Faith, the main features of its participation in the life of society. First and foremost, Bahá'ís endeavour, whether as individuals or as a community, to put into practice the command of Bahá'u'lláh: "They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations." It is through "association and meeting", 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained further, that "we find happiness and development, individual and collective." "That which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men", He has written in this connection, "is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind." Even in the case of religion, He has made it clear that it "must be the cause of love and fellowship. Should religion become the cause of contention and enmity, its absence is preferable." So it is that Bahá'ís do their utmost at all times to heed the counsel of Bahá'u'lláh, "Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity." "That one indeed is a man", He exhorts His followers, "who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race." "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in," is His admonition, "and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements." "The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated. "The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity." "So powerful is the light of unity", Bahá'u'lláh declares, "that it can illuminate the whole earth."

It is with such thoughts in mind that Bahá'ís enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity. Indeed, the standard set by passages such as the above inspires the Bahá'í community to become actively engaged in as many aspects of contemporary life as feasible. In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should

be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavours that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. It should be noted here that, despite the limitations imposed by adherence to this principle, the community has not experienced a shortage of opportunities for collaboration; so many people in the world today are working intensely towards one or another aim which Bahá'ís share. In this respect, they also take care not to overstep certain bounds with their colleagues and associates. They are not to regard any joint undertaking as an occasion to impose religious convictions. Self-righteousness and other unfortunate manifestations of religious zeal are to be utterly avoided. Bahá'ís do, however, readily offer to their collaborators the lessons they have learned through their own experience, just as they are happy to incorporate into their community-building efforts insights gained through such association.

This brings us, at last, to the specific question of political activity. The conviction of the Bahá'í community that humanity, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, stands at the threshold of its collective maturity; its belief that the principle of the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity, implies a change in the very structure of society; its dedication to a learning process that, animated by this principle, explores the workings of a new set of relationships among the individual, the community and the institutions of society, the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization; its confidence that a revised conception of power, freed from the notion of dominance with the accompanying ideas of contest, contention, division and superiority, underlies the desired set of relationships; its commitment to a vision of a world that, benefitting from humanity's rich cultural diversity, abides no lines of separation—these all constitute essential elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics set out in brief below.

Bahá'ís do not seek political power. They will not accept political posts in their respective governments, whatever the particular system in place, though they will take up positions which they deem to be purely administrative in nature. They will not affiliate themselves with political parties, become entangled in partisan issues, or participate in programmes tied to the divisive agendas of any group or faction. At the same time, Bahá'ís respect those who, out of a sincere desire to serve their countries, choose to pursue political aspirations or to engage in political activity. The approach adopted by the Bahá'í community of non-involvement in such activity is not intended as a statement expressing some fundamental objection to politics in its true sense; indeed, humanity organizes itself through its political affairs. Bahá'ís vote in civil elections, as long as they do not have to identify themselves with any party in order to do so. In this connection, they view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of a society, and they undertake, one and all, to observe the laws of the land in which they reside, without allowing their inner religious beliefs to be violated. Bahá'ís will not be party to any instigation to overthrow a government. Nor will they interfere in political relations between the governments of different nations. This does not mean that they are naive about political processes in the world today and make no distinction between just and tyrannical rule. The rulers of the earth have sacred obligations to fulfil towards their people, who should be seen as the most precious treasure of any nation. Wherever they reside, Bahá'ís endeavour to uphold the standard of justice, addressing inequities directed towards themselves or towards others, but only through lawful means available to them, eschewing all forms of violent protest. Moreover, in no way does the love they hold in their hearts for humanity run counter to the sense of duty they feel to expend their energies in service to their respective countries.

The approach, or strategy if you will, with the simple set of parameters outlined in the foregoing paragraph enables the community, in a world where nations and tribes are pitted one against the other and people are divided and separated by social structures, to maintain its cohesion and integrity as a global entity and to ensure that the activities of the Bahá'ís in one country do not jeopardize the existence of those elsewhere. Guarded against competing interests of nations and political parties, the Bahá'í community is thus able to build its capacity to contribute to processes that promote peace and unity.

Dear Friends: We recognize that treading this path, which you have done so ably for decades, is not without its challenges. It asks for an integrity that cannot be shaken, for a rectitude of conduct that cannot be undermined, for a clarity of thought that cannot be obscured, for a love of one's country that cannot be manipulated. Now that your fellow citizens understand your plight, and possibilities will no doubt open for you to participate even further in the life of society, we pray that you will be assisted from on High in explaining to your friends and compatriots the framework articulated in these pages so that, in collaboration with them, you will find increasing opportunities to labour for the good of your people without compromising, in any way, your identity as followers of One Who summoned humanity, more than a century ago, to a new World Order.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Riḍván 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

“The Book of God is wide open, and His Word is summoning mankind unto Him.” In such exhilarating terms does the Supreme Pen describe the advent of the day of union and ingathering. Bahá'u'lláh continues: “Incline your ears, O friends of God, to the voice of Him Whom the world hath wronged, and hold fast unto whatsoever will exalt His Cause.” He further exhorts His followers: “With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your lives to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all.”

Beloved co-workers: This stirring pronouncement comes to mind unbidden when we see your consecrated efforts around the world in answer to the call of Bahá'u'lláh. The splendid response to His summons can be witnessed on every side. To those who pause to reflect on the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, it becomes impossible to ignore how the power possessed by the Word of God is ascendant in the hearts of women and men, children and youth, in country after country, in cluster after cluster.

A worldwide community is refining its ability to read its immediate reality, analyse its possibilities, and apply judiciously the methods and instruments of the Five Year Plan. As anticipated, experience is most rapidly accumulating in clusters where the frontiers of learning are being consciously advanced. In such places, the means for enabling an ever-rising number of individuals to strengthen their capacity for service are well understood. A vibrant training institute functions as the mainstay of the community's efforts to advance the Plan and, as early as possible, skills and abilities developed through participation in institute courses are deployed in the field. Some, through their everyday social interactions, encounter souls who are open to the exploration of spiritual matters carried out in a variety of settings; some are in a position to respond to receptivity in a village or neighbourhood, perhaps by having relocated to the area. Growing numbers arise to shoulder responsibility, swelling the ranks of those who serve as tutors, animators, and teachers of children; who administer and coordinate; or who otherwise labour in support of the work. The friends' commitment to learning finds expression through constancy in their own endeavours and a willingness to accompany others in theirs. Further, they are able to keep two complementary perspectives on the pattern of action developing in the cluster firmly in view: one, the three-month cycles of activity—the rhythmic pulse of the programme of growth—and the other, the distinct stages of a process of education for children, for junior youth, and for youth and adults. While understanding clearly the relationship that connects these three stages, the friends are aware that each has its own dynamics, its own requirements, and its own inherent merit. Above all, they are conscious of the operation of powerful spiritual forces, whose workings can be discerned as much in the quantitative data that reflect the community's progress as in the array of accounts that narrate its accomplishments. What is especially promising is that so many of these distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development.

As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavours. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives. Equally, they have come to recognize that when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time, but that this in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavours. For they understand that if learning is to be their mode of operation, they must be alert to the potential offered by any instrument of the Plan that proves to be especially suited to a particular point in time and, where called for, invest greater energy in its development; it does not follow, however, that every person must be occupied with the same aspect of the Plan. The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a programme of growth to be directed towards the same end. Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals or collectively; in another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.

Furthermore, the friends are conscious that the work of the Cause proceeds at different speeds in different places and for good reason—it is, after all, an organic phenomenon—and they take joy and encouragement from every instance of progress they see. Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all. Gatherings for reflection are increasingly seen as occasions where the community's efforts, in their entirety, are the subject of earnest and uplifting deliberation. Participants learn what has been accomplished overall, understand their own labours in that light, and enhance their knowledge about the process of growth by absorbing the counsels of the institutions and drawing on the experience of their fellow believers. Such experience is also shared in numerous other spaces that are emerging for consultation amongst friends intensely engaged in specific endeavours, whether they are pursuing a common line of action or serving in a particular part of the cluster. All these insights are located in a wider appreciation that progress is most easily achieved in an environment imbued with love—one in which shortcomings are overlooked with forbearance, obstacles are overcome with patience, and tested approaches are embraced with enthusiasm. And so it is that, through the wise direction of institutions and agencies of the Faith functioning at every level, the friends' exertions, however modest individually, coalesce into a collective effort to ensure that receptivity to the call of the Blessed Beauty is identified quickly and nurtured effectively. A cluster in this condition is clearly one where the relationships among the individual, the institutions, and the community—the Plan's three protagonists—are evolving soundly.

From this landscape of thriving activity, one prospect deserves particular mention. In the message addressed to you three years ago, we expressed the hope that, in clusters with an intensive programme of growth in operation, the friends would endeavour to learn more about the ways of community building by developing centres of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages. Our hopes have been exceeded, for even in clusters where the programme of growth has not yet achieved intensity, efforts by a few to initiate core activities among the residents of small areas have demonstrated their efficacy time and again. In essence, this approach centres on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of

populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.

While expansion and consolidation have steadily progressed over the past year, other important areas of activity have also moved forward, often in close parallel. As a prime example, the advances at the level of culture being witnessed in some villages and neighbourhoods are due in no small part to what is being learned from Bahá'í involvement in social action. Our Office of Social and Economic Development recently prepared a document which distils thirty years of experience that has accumulated in this field since that Office was established at the Bahá'í World Centre. Among the observations it makes is that efforts to engage in social action are lent vital impetus by the training institute. This is not simply through the rise in human resources it fosters. The spiritual insights, qualities, and abilities that are cultivated by the institute process have proven to be as crucial for participation in social action as they are for contributing to the process of growth. Further, it is explained how the Bahá'í community's distinct spheres of endeavour are governed by a common, evolving, conceptual framework composed of mutually reinforcing elements, albeit these assume varied expressions in different domains of action. The document we have described was lately shared with National Spiritual Assemblies, and we invite them, in consultation with the Counsellors, to consider how the concepts it explores can help to enhance existing efforts of social action pursued under their auspices and raise consciousness of this significant dimension of Bahá'í endeavour. This should not be interpreted as a general call for widespread activity in this area—the emergence of social action happens naturally, as a growing community gathers strength—but it is timely that the friends reflect more deeply on the implications of their exertions for the transformation of society. The surge in learning that is occurring in this field places increased demands upon the Office of Social and Economic Development, and steps are being taken to ensure that its functioning evolves commensurately.

An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do

Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations. These expressions of appreciation and support have also come from some previously unexpected quarters. For example, even in the Cradle of the Faith, despite formidable obstacles placed by the oppressor in their path, the Bahá'ís are increasingly recognized for the profound implications their message holds for the state of their nation and respected for their unbending determination to contribute to the progress of their homeland.

The suffering borne by the faithful in Iran, particularly in the decades since the most recent wave of persecutions began, has spurred their brothers and sisters in other countries to come to their defence. From among the invaluable endowments which, as a consequence of that endurance, the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired, we mention one in this connection: an impressive network of specialized agencies at the national level that has proven capable of systematically developing relations with governments and organizations of civil society. Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. At the grassroots, involvement in this kind of endeavour builds naturally, through the same organic approach that characterizes the steady increase of the friends' engagement in social action, and no special attempt to stimulate it is necessary. At the national level, however, it is more often becoming the focus of attention for these same dedicated agencies already functioning in dozens of national communities, and it is proceeding according to the familiar and fruitful pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.

Encouraging progress is occurring in other areas as well. In Santiago, Chile, where the Mother Temple of South America is being erected, the building work continues apace. The concrete construction of the foundations, basement, and service tunnel is complete, as are the columns that will bear the superstructure. The anticipation associated with this project is growing, and a similar sense of expectation is stirring in the seven countries where national or local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up. In each one, preparations have commenced, and the contributions the believers are making to the Temples Fund have begun to be used; however, practical considerations, such as location, design, and resources, represent only one aspect of the work being undertaken by the friends. Fundamentally, theirs is a spiritual endeavour, one in which the whole community participates. The Master refers to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as “the lodestone of divine confirmations”, “the mighty foundation of the Lord”, and “the firm pillar of the Faith of God”. Wherever it is established, it will naturally be an integral component of the process of community building that surrounds it. Already, in those places where a House of Worship is to appear, awareness of this reality is deepening among the rank and file of the believers, who recognize that their collective life must more and more reflect that union of worship and service which the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár embodies.

On each front, then, we see the Bahá'í community moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks when resources make it possible, agile in its response to fresh imperatives, conscious of the need to ensure coherence among the various areas of activity in which it is engaged, wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission. Its enthusiasm and devotion are apparent in the tremendous fervour generated by the announcement some two months ago of the convocation of 95 youth conferences throughout the world.

We are gratified not only by the reaction of the youth themselves but also by the expressions of support voiced by their fellow believers, who appreciate how the younger followers of Bahá'u'lláh act as a vital stimulus to the entire body of the Cause.

We are filled with hope by the successive evidences we see of the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's message, the reach of its influence, and the growing awareness of the ideals it enshrines. In this season of anniversaries, we call to remembrance that "Day of supreme felicity", separated from this Ridván by a century and a half, when the Abhá Beauty first proclaimed His Mission to His companions in the Najíbíyyih Garden. From that sanctified spot, the Word of God has gone forth to every city and every shore, summoning humanity to an encounter with its Lord. And from that initial retinue of God-intoxicated lovers, a diverse community of purpose has blossomed, variegated flowers in the garden He has reared. With each passing day, rising numbers of newly awakened souls turn in supplication towards His Shrine, the place where we, in honour of that blessed Day and in gratitude for every bounty bestowed upon the community of the Greatest Name, bow our heads in prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 May 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

So overwhelming has been the response of the Bahá'í youth and their friends—indeed, of Bahá'í communities worldwide—to the announcement of 95 conferences to be convened around the world between July and October, that existing arrangements now seem unlikely to accommodate the number of youth wishing to attend, and it is apparent that a further complement of gatherings is therefore required. With great joy, we take this opportunity, when the members of National Spiritual Assemblies are gathered in consultation at the Eleventh International Bahá'í Convention, to announce today our decision to convene an additional 19 conferences in the following locations: Bertoua, Bidor, Biratnagar, Brisbane, Cagayan de Oro, Georgetown (Guyana), Houston, Kampong Thom, Kigoma, Los Angeles, Mahikeng, Milne Bay, Minneapolis, Montreal, Nuku'alofa, Nundu (Democratic Republic of the Congo), Seattle, Vientiane, and Washington, D.C.

This welcome development is indicative of the magnitude of the reservoirs of energy and devotion that the youth possess. Every effort must be made to assist them to continue to act on their responsibilities, and we look to them to expand the horizons of what the Bahá'í community can accomplish. We offer thanks to the Blessed Beauty for endowing His youthful followers with an immense collective capacity for service, and we beseech Him that it might be realized in benefit to humankind.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

16 May 2013

To the delegates gathered at Bahá'í National Conventions

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Eleventh International Convention, recently concluded, offered all who were present a glimpse of the promise of Bahá'u'lláh to unite the peoples of the world. More than a thousand members of one hundred and fifty-seven National Spiritual Assemblies attended, and nearly five hundred more, including those from an additional fourteen countries, participated in the election by mail. This diverse group of women and men, a veritable cross section of humanity, evinced, in their participation in the electoral process and subsequent contributions to the Convention consultations, a spirit of sanctity and love, a unity of thought and purpose, and a consecration to the collective enterprise of applying the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh that earned our deep admiration. No doubt, the members of your National Assembly, or the Counsellors, will share with you the joyous fellowship they experienced and the insights they gained during the productive days spent in the Holy Land.

You now gather in National Conventions to carry out your own sacred responsibilities in the Bahá'í Administrative Order. Foremost is the election of the members of your National Assembly, when you will choose individuals who can meet the pressing requirements of the progress of the Cause at the present stage of its development. Our letter dated 25 March 2007 was intended to strengthen the Bahá'í electoral process, and we urge you to give renewed consideration to its salient points. In the features and outcomes of this electoral process that distinguish it from contemporary practices we find not limitations, but dawning points of profound implication. The delegates, as well as the generality of the believers, uphold the purity of Bahá'í elections, scrupulously avoiding electioneering or discussion of who should or should not be a member, even when specific names are not mentioned; for not only does the Guardian prohibit reference to particular personalities, but he also states that “we should refrain from influencing the opinions of others.” Collectively, the friends strive to purge themselves of every trace of worldly tendencies—pursuit of personal ambitions, promotion of individuals, contest, and partisanship—which can corrupt and distort an election’s spiritual character. Delegates are obliged to become “intelligent, well-informed and responsible” electors so as to “be able to make a wise choice at the election time.” They enjoy the unfettered right to choose from among all those eligible, whether it be to retain members or to select new ones. The community wholeheartedly embraces the result of the election, confident that the delegates have cast their ballots for those for whom prayer and reflection have inspired them to vote.

Within the administrative arrangements of the Bahá'í community there are a number of spaces that allow for the exchange of views, including cluster reflection gatherings, institutional meetings, and the Nineteen Day Feast. The National Convention is another such occasion, but unique in that it brings together the National Assembly and elected representatives from all parts of the country. The conduct of this consultative dimension of the Convention calls for thoughtful attention.

Shoghi Effendi stated that the National Convention should “fulfill the functions of an enlightened, consultative and cooperative body that will enrich the experience, enhance the prestige, support the authority, and assist the deliberations of the National Spiritual Assembly.” Although delegates are to

offer their views in a full, frank, and unhampered manner, he advised that time not be spent on problems of secondary importance and that disruptive forces, “which are but the outcome of human passion and selfishness,” should be resisted. Instead, the Guardian expected those assembled to “approach their task with absolute detachment” and “concentrate their attention on the most important and pressing issues” in order to obtain a “deeper and broader vision of the Cause through an increase in the spirit of unity and of wholehearted cooperation.” “The unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” he explained, “and 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.”

Throughout the community, as the processes of the Divine Plan have become more and more complex, the nature of discussions on matters pertaining to growth and development of the Faith has evolved. A distinctive conversation is carried out, sometimes formally and often informally, at various levels and in different configurations. In every setting, each participant, whatever the nature of his or her service, provides a particular contribution and takes away fresh insight. From this rich set of interactions about experience unfolding within the Plan’s framework for action, consensus on strategies and plans emerges naturally. Among institutions, discussions flourish in an atmosphere of love and genuine respect, and unity of thought is readily achieved. And in settings such as cluster reflection meetings and gatherings of tutors, children’s class teachers, or animators of junior youth groups arranged by the training institute, aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation are taken up by the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to local circumstances. This conversation of the Bahá’í world, grounded in allegiance to Bahá’u’lláh and safeguarded by firmness in His Covenant, increasingly transcends the habits of speech characteristic of an age preoccupied with trivial or misdirected interests. With time, accrued experience, and continued guidance, this ongoing conversation comes to be distinguished by a more worthy etiquette of expression and gradually clarifies ambiguities, expands participation, airs concerns, strengthens bonds of love and association, refocuses endeavor, reconciles differences, resolves problems, and contributes to happiness and well-being.

Your consultations with the National Assembly at the Convention take place within the context of the larger set of relationships that bind the Plan’s three protagonists and must increasingly reflect the features of this distinctive conversation. Each year the Ridván message sets the stage for the discussions at Convention by conveying a sense of the current progress of the Bahá’í world and the work that lies ahead. Your contribution, though free and frank, is not characterized by insistence on personal opinion. While there may be a wide range of important topics, attention to the progress of the Five Year Plan and the requirements of its remaining years cannot be neglected. You bring to the Convention insights gleaned from the conversation unfolding within your region. In this way, you enrich the perspective of the National Assembly and become informed of its hopes, challenges, and aims. You enhance your own understanding of the affairs of the Cause from a national perspective and rededicate yourself to the community’s common enterprise.

We are pleased to witness the promising advances in the deliberations at National Conventions in recent years, and it is our ardent prayer that you may arise to achieve the high aims set forth by the Guardian for this vital institution of the Cause.

The Universal House of Justice

1 July 2013

To the participants in the forthcoming 114 youth conferences throughout the world

Dearly loved Friends,

When the exalted figure of the Báb, aged just twenty-five, arose to deliver His revolutionizing message to the world, many among those who accepted and spread His teachings were young, even younger than the Báb Himself. Their heroism, immortalized in all its dazzling intensity in *The Dawn-Breakers*, will illumine the annals of human history for centuries to come. Thus began a pattern in which every generation of youth, drawing inspiration from the same divine impulse to cast the world anew, has seized the opportunity to contribute to the latest stage in the unfolding process that is to transform the life of humankind. It is a pattern that has suffered no interruption from the time of the Báb to this present hour.

The lifelong exertion and sacrifice of your spiritual forebears did much to establish the Faith in diverse lands and to hasten the appearance of a global community of purpose. Though the tasks that lie before you are not the same as theirs, the responsibilities with which you are entrusted are no less vital. After many a decade, the world-embracing labours of this far-flung community to obtain a more adequate understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to apply the principles it enshrines have culminated in the emergence of a potent framework for action, refined through experience. You are fortunate to be familiar with its methods and approaches now so well established. Through perseverance in their implementation, many of you will already have seen for yourselves signs of the society-building power of the divine teachings. At the conference you attend, you are being invited to consider the contribution that can be made by any young person who wishes to answer Bahá'u'lláh's summons and help to release that power. To assist you, a number of themes have been identified for you to explore, beginning with looking at your current time of life.

Across the world are to be gathered, in scores of youth conferences sharing the same aim, tens of thousands who have much in common. Although your realities are shaped by a broad diversity of circumstances, yet a desire to bring about constructive change and a capacity for meaningful service, both characteristic of your stage of life, are neither limited to any race or nationality, nor dependent upon material means. This bright period of youth you share is experienced by all—but it is brief, and buffeted by numerous social forces. How important it is, then, to strive to be among those who, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "plucked the fruit of life".

With this in mind, we are delighted that so many of you are already engaged in service by conducting community-building activities, as well as by organizing, coordinating, or otherwise administering the efforts of others; in all of these endeavours you are taking an increasing level of responsibility upon your shoulders. Not surprisingly, it is your age group that is gaining the most experience at aiding junior youth, and children too, with their moral and spiritual development, fostering in them capacity for collective service and true friendship. After all, aware of the world which these young souls will need to navigate, with its pitfalls and also its opportunities, you readily appreciate the importance of spiritual strengthening and preparation. Conscious, as you are, that Bahá'u'lláh came to transform both

the inner life and external conditions of humanity, you are assisting those younger than yourselves to refine their characters and prepare to assume responsibility for the well-being of their communities. As they enter adolescence, you are helping them to enhance their power of expression, as well as enabling a strong moral sensibility to take root within them. In so doing, your own sense of purpose is becoming more clearly defined as you heed Bahá'u'lláh's injunction: "Let deeds, not words, be your adorning."

To follow a path of service, whatever form one's activity assumes, requires faith and tenacity. In this connection, the benefit of walking that path in the company of others is immense. Loving fellowship, mutual encouragement, and willingness to learn together are natural properties of any group of youth sincerely striving for the same ends, and should also characterize those essential relationships that bind together the components of society. Given this, we hope the bonds you develop through association with other conference participants will prove abiding. Indeed, long after the gatherings close, may these ties of friendship and common calling help keep your feet firm.

The possibilities presented by collective action are especially evident in the work of community building, a process that is gaining momentum in many a cluster and in neighbourhoods and villages throughout the world that have become centres of intense activity. Youth are often at the forefront of the work in these settings—not only Bahá'í youth, but those of like mind who can see the positive effects of what the Bahá'ís have initiated and grasp the underlying vision of unity and spiritual transformation. In such places, the imperative to share the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh with receptive hearts and explore the implications of His message for today's world is keenly felt. When so much of society invites passivity and apathy or, worse still, encourages behaviour harmful to oneself and others, a conspicuous contrast is offered by those who are enhancing the capacity of a population to cultivate and sustain a spiritually enriching pattern of community life.

Yet, although many admire your dynamism and ideals, the true significance of these endeavours is less apparent to the world at large. You, however, are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual's spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one's energies are being channelled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal.

All these thoughts are openings to an inclusive and ever-expanding conversation that will extend through the conferences and well beyond them as you engage many others in earnest discussions that lift the heart and awaken the mind to the possibilities of what could be. Drawing upon your collective experience will further enrich your deliberations. At this propitious time, our hearts will be with you, and as each conference concludes, we will eagerly look to see what will follow. For every gathering we will entreat the Almighty to bestow upon its participants a measure of His boundless grace, knowing, as you do, that divine assistance is promised to all those who arise to serve humankind in response to the galvanizing call of Bahá'u'lláh.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

5 December 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

When He arrived in the Holy Land, exactly one hundred years ago today, at the conclusion of His “epoch-making journeys” to Egypt and the West, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá eschewed any ceremony or fanfare just as He had at His departure. But between His going and His return, a defining period in Bahá’í history had unfolded—a “glorious chapter”, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, during which “seeds of undreamt-of potentialities” had been sown, “with the hand of the Centre of the Covenant Himself”, in the “fertile fields” to the west.

The accounts of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s travels and of the effect He had on those who met Him are legion. Some went to extraordinary lengths to enter His presence—going by boat, by foot, or even under railway trains—and, by the urgency of their desire to see Him, imprinted themselves on the consciousness of future generations of adults and children. The testimonies of those who were transformed by even a brief, sometimes near wordless encounter with their beloved Master remain deeply stirring. In the wide array of visitors He received—rich and poor, black and white, indigenous and émigré—the universal embrace of His Father’s Faith was unmistakably in evidence. It is impossible to adequately gauge the full scope of what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá accomplished within this period. Many of the seeds He planted, and which He nurtured towards maturity through an extensive correspondence that He maintained until the end of His life, would blossom into a steadfast community capable of bearing the great weight of work in the years to come, supporting the first structures of national Bahá’í administration and beginning to act on the Master’s longing that the divine teachings be brought to every city and shore.

The friends have, of course, called these points to mind during this centenary period, and they have done much more besides. As we hoped, they have given their attention to the tasks before them, drawing inspiration from the Master’s potent example and timeless counsels. We have been pleased to see how, in particular, efforts to bring spiritual education to children and young people have flourished. Work to establish the institution of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár*, the singular significance of which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed so pointedly during His visit to the United States, is making progress in eight countries, whilst in every land, devotional meetings—a communal aspect of the godly life—are thriving. The Bahá’í community’s increasing engagement with the life of society, which is enabling it to offer a fresh perspective to formal and informal conversations of all kinds, carries distinct echoes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s deep concern for the needs of the age. In clusters where the demands created by the scale and intensity of activity are most acutely felt, more complex schemes of coordination are emerging through a gradual and patient process of learning. In certain regions of the world where the institutions are overseeing special initiatives, an influx of eager pioneers is helping to strengthen the foundations of sustained growth and broaden the scope of what can be achieved by a community. The work of expansion and consolidation is advancing through the unflagging labours of countless devoted souls who have, in numerous ways, followed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in treading the plane of sacrifice. The heightened capacity of a worldwide community to assist populations to move towards the vision conceived by Bahá’u’lláh was conspicuously evident at the Eleventh International Bahá’í Convention. That same capacity was vividly

illustrated in the film *Frontiers of Learning* and explored in detail in the document *Insights from the Frontiers of Learning*, which have stimulated profound reflection not only on the dynamics of growth but also on the means to treat the roots of many a social malady. And in the closing months of this three-year period came the most spectacular demonstration of how the present generation has responded to the call of service to humankind singularly embodied in the Person of the Master: the gathering of more than eighty thousand youth in a four-month series of conferences held in well over a hundred far-strewn locations across the globe.

Although each possessed its own unique features, all conferences shared essential attributes in common—the meticulous care that characterized the preparations, the oneness of mind that was palpable at each gathering, the energy that has surged therefrom. In the strenuous efforts they made to attend can be glimpsed the depth of commitment felt by the participants. Some laboured with great sacrifice to raise the necessary funds from meagre resources; in other cases, by explaining the noble purpose and wholesome nature of the events, the friends obtained special permission from the authorities for the arrangements. Shipping lines were persuaded to change course to collect participants, while some youth walked for days to reach a venue. Reports of the insights generated, the creativity released, the moving testimonies delivered on each occasion and, most of all, the impetus lent to acts of service are evidence that those present were touched by spiritual forces more enduring, more deeply rooted than anything that could be elicited by the thrill of fellowship and large numbers alone. It is most heartening that tens of thousands of youth, unwilling to succumb to triviality or to settle for easy conformity, have now been brought within the widening embrace of a conversation and pattern of action of far-reaching consequence regarding how to live a coherent life and be an agent of spiritual and social transformation. The new levels of collaboration these conferences demanded of the institutions to mobilize and guide such large numbers and prepare the host of facilitators to assist them; the wholehearted collective effort required of the community as it threw wide open the circle of participation and witnessed the profound effect of doing so; the serious commitment evinced by the individual who, drawing on the concepts explored in the conference materials, is joining the tens of thousands occupied with reaching out to hundreds of thousands of others—these, together, have contributed to a marked rise in capacity in the three protagonists upon whom the success of the Five Year Plan depends. And while we acknowledge that the youth are at the forefront of this advance, its distinguishing feature is that the community rose as one to support, encourage, and champion this phenomenon, and now rejoices to see itself progress as an interdependent, organic whole, readier to meet the imperatives of this day.

Given all this, we have no hesitation in recognizing that what these developments reveal is an advance in the process of entry by troops of a kind not experienced heretofore.

We call upon all to reflect upon the significance of the endeavour in which the community of the Greatest Name is engaged, the purpose of which the Master strove to underline so often in the course of His travels, and to rededicate themselves to contribute their share to its outcome. “Try with all your hearts”, He urged one audience, “to be willing channels for God’s Bounty. For I say unto you that He has chosen you to be His messengers of love throughout the world, to be His bearers of spiritual gifts to man, to be the means of spreading unity and concord on the earth.” “Perchance,” He remarked on another occasion, “God willing, this terrestrial world may become as a celestial mirror upon which we may behold the imprint of the traces of Divinity, and the fundamental qualities of a new creation may be reflected from the reality of love shining in human hearts.” To this end do all your efforts tend. During the second half of the Five Year Plan, the society-building power of the Faith must be released

within thousands of clusters where programmes of growth need to be initiated, reinforced, or extended. The challenge for Bahá'í institutions and their agencies will be to furnish the means to accompany all those who cherish a pure and earnest desire for a better world, whatever their degree of involvement in the process of spiritual education so far, and help them translate that desire into the practical steps that day by day and week by week accrete to build vibrant, flourishing communities. How fitting that, at this hour, a generation of youth has come into its own, ready to assume growing responsibility, since its contribution to the work at hand will prove decisive in the months and years ahead. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we will entreat the Almighty to sustain all those who would be a part of this immense undertaking, who prefer the true prosperity of others over their own ease and leisure, and whose eyes are fixed upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá for a flawless pattern of how to be; all this, that "those who walk in darkness should come into the light" and "those who are excluded should join the inner circle of the Kingdom".

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

29 January 2014

To the Bahá'í youth in the Cradle of the Faith,

Almost a year has passed since we called the Bahá'í youth 29.1 throughout the world to a higher recognition of the significant contribution they are to make to the regeneration of the world and the unity of its peoples, and invited them to join those in the vanguard of service to humankind. In doing so they were asked to recognize that countless other young people aspire to the same vision of unity, justice, and prosperity by which they themselves have been galvanized. To consider this critical responsibility, we encouraged them to participate together with their close friends in an unprecedented series of 114 conferences spanning the globe.

The conferences were an occasion for the participants to reflect on the astonishing powers and unique capacities associated with the period of youth and to consider deeply those societal forces that exert themselves on the youth—forces that aim to distract them from significant social change, weaken their commitment to service, ensnare them in consumerism, and dissuade them from belief in their own God-given capacity and that of others. The participants considered, too, practical ways in which to counter those effects, build bonds of friendship and profound connection, promote unity, and equip themselves with the concepts needed to succeed in constructing a new world through collective endeavor.

The admirable response of the Bahá'í youth and thousands of their friends offered another glimpse of the fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's hope that in the heyday of life and their prime of youth souls would arise in service. By any measure—the strenuous and at times heroic efforts they made to attend, the depth of understanding and insight they attained, or the enthusiasm and determination they demonstrated to transform their world and serve their society—the initial outcome of these gatherings was extraordinary.

You have certainly heard the news of these conferences and may indeed have seen the beautiful images and films from the gatherings; you may even have had the chance to study with others the concepts and themes that were the central feature of the gatherings. Undoubtedly you will derive a fresh measure of energy and zeal as you reflect on these concepts and consider the implications they hold for your lives and for your circumstances.

As the valiant youth in the Cradle of the Faith, you are well aware of your mission to be a source of hope to those around you, to be channels of love and affection, to be symbols of forgiveness and patience, of serenity and strength to your compatriots, and above all, to be in the front ranks of that process by which the worldwide community has learned to build capacity for service, heighten unity, deepen understanding, and hone abilities so that purposeful action for the benefit of mankind may ensue. Through the spiritual and social transformation thus promoted, the Bahá'í world has come to realize that what is being cultivated is a process that enhances orientation to service and commitment to the application of the divine precepts—a process that holds far-reaching implications for the life of the individual and for the betterment of the world.

We know, of course, the privations and limitations under which you labor. Whether in pursuing your education, earning a livelihood, working towards your legitimate aspirations, or practicing your faith, your freedoms are curtailed by many an injustice. From the very beginning the compatriots of Bahá'u'lláh have shared in the suffering He sustained. You are the embodiments of these words of the Master: "Thou didst follow in the footsteps of the Blessed Beauty and didst drink a cup from the ocean of His tribulations." But you know, too, that it is precisely your staunchness that lends such lustre to the qualities your community exhibits. You may be sure that it is not only history that tells of the courage and steadfastness of your community, but that the significance of a community that under severe and sustained oppression has remained forward looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serve its society, is not lost on those who dispassionately view your present situation. Perhaps the most compelling and clear example of your constructive resilience is evident currently in your earnest striving for knowledge, in your commitment to the loftiest values of faith and reason which the Cause inculcates, and in your perseverance in pursuit of higher education. The world can see a community that has rejected the label of victim and chosen instead to draw on the highest reservoirs of solidarity and collaboration in its resolve to advance as a living entity—that its youth might progress and attain the heights of learning and that society itself benefit therefrom.

"The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day." With these words did the Ancient Beauty warn humankind about its immediate future. "Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly." You surely see how throughout the world the light of true religion is fading. Yet, you are the very examples of what illumination this light can bring. You are living proofs that religion promotes upright character, instills forbearance, compassion, forgiveness, magnanimity, high-mindedness. It prohibits harm to others and invites souls to the plane of sacrifice, that they may give of themselves for the good of others. It imparts a world-embracing vision and cleanses the heart from self-centeredness and prejudice. It inspires souls to build unity, to endeavor for material and spiritual betterment for all, to see their own happiness in that of others, to advance learning and science, to be an instrument of true joy, and to revive the body of humankind. It burnishes the mirror of the soul until it reflects the qualities of the spirit with which it has been endowed. And then the power of the divine attributes is manifested in the individual and collective lives of humanity and aids the emergence of a new social order. Such is the true conception of religion set forth in the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Praised be God that you are ever striving to model your lives after the sublime pattern enshrined in His Teachings.

We offer supplications at the Sacred Threshold on your behalf.

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 2014

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

A full three years have passed since the inception of the current stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, an undertaking that binds together the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in one united spiritual endeavour. Just two years separate the friends of God from its fixed conclusion. The two essential movements which continue to propel the process of growth—the steady flow of participants through the sequence of training institute courses and the movement of clusters along a continuum of development—have both been immensely reinforced by the outpouring of energy released at the youth conferences held last year. The expanded capacity the Bahá'í world has acquired for mobilizing large numbers of young people in the field of service can now yield further fruit. For in the time that remains, the critical tasks of strengthening existing programmes of growth and beginning new ones urgently beckon. The community of the Greatest Name is well positioned, before the expiration of this period, to add to the clusters where such programmes have already emerged the two thousand that remain of the goal.

How glad we are to see that this endeavour is being vigorously advanced across the far-flung regions of the globe, and in a diversity of circumstances and settings, in clusters already numbering some three thousand. Many clusters are at a point where momentum is being generated through the implementation of a few simple lines of action. In others, after successive cycles of activity, the number of individuals taking initiative within the framework of the Plan has increased and the pitch of activity intensified; as the quality of the process of spiritual education is enhanced through experience, souls are more readily attracted to participate in it. From time to time, there may be a lull in activity or an obstacle to the way forward; searching consultation on the reasons for the impasse, combined with patience, courage, and perseverance, enables momentum to be regained. In more and more clusters, the programme of growth is increasing in scope and complexity, commensurate with the rising capacity of the Plan's three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—to create a mutually supportive environment. And we are delighted that, as anticipated, there are a growing number of clusters where a hundred or more individuals are now facilitating the engagement of a thousand or more in weaving a pattern of life, spiritual, dynamic, transformative. Underlying the process even from the start is, of course, a collective movement towards the vision of material and spiritual prosperity set forth by Him Who is the Lifegiver of the World. But when such large numbers are involved, the movement of an entire population becomes discernible.

This movement is especially in evidence in those clusters where a local *Mashriqu'l-Adhkár* is to be established. One such, by way of example, is in Vanuatu. The friends who reside on the island of Tanna have made a supreme effort to raise consciousness of the planned House of Worship, and have already engaged no less than a third of the island's 30,000 inhabitants in an expanding conversation about its significance in a variety of ways. The ability to sustain an elevated conversation among so many people has been refined through years of experience sharing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and extending the reach of a vibrant training institute. Junior youth groups on the island are particularly thriving, urged

on by the support of village chiefs who see how the participants are spiritually empowered. Encouraged by the unity and dedication that exist among them, these young people have not only dispelled the languor of passivity in themselves but have, through various practical projects, found means to work for the betterment of their community, and as a result, those of all ages, not least their own parents, have been galvanized into constructive action. Among the believers and the wider society, the bounty of being able to turn to a Local Spiritual Assembly for guidance and for the resolution of difficult situations is being recognized, and in turn, the decisions of the Spiritual Assemblies are increasingly characterized by wisdom and sensitivity. There is much here to indicate that, when the elements of the Plan's framework for action are combined into a coherent whole, the impact on a population can be profound. And it is against the background of ongoing expansion and consolidation—the thirtieth cycle of the intensive programme of growth has recently concluded—that the friends are actively exploring, with the rest of the island's inhabitants, what it means for a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, a “collective centre for men's souls”, to be raised up in their midst. With the active support of traditional leaders, Tanna islanders have offered no less than a hundred design ideas for the Temple, demonstrating the extent to which the House of Worship has captured imaginations, and opening up enthralling prospects for the influence it is set to exert on the lives lived beneath its shade.

This heartening account has its counterpart in numerous advanced clusters where the implications of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings are being brought to bear on the conditions of life in neighbourhoods and villages. In each, a people, increasingly aware of the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, is learning, through reflection on experience, consultation, and study, how to act on the truths enshrined in His Revelation, such that the widening circle of spiritual kindred is ever more closely bound together by ties of collective worship and service.

In many ways, the communities that have progressed furthest are tracing an inviting path for others to follow. Yet whatever the level of activity in a cluster, it is the capacity for learning among the local friends, within a common framework, that fosters progress along the path of development. Everyone has a share in this enterprise; the contribution of each serves to enrich the whole. The most dynamic clusters are those in which, irrespective of the resources the community possesses or the number of activities being undertaken, the friends appreciate that their task is to identify what is required for progress to occur—the nascent capacity that must be nurtured, the new skill that must be acquired, the initiators of a fledgling effort who must be accompanied, the space for reflection that must be cultivated, the collective endeavour that must be coordinated—and then find creative ways in which the necessary time and resources can be made available to achieve it. The very fact that each set of circumstances presents its own challenges is enabling every community not simply to benefit from what is being learned in the rest of the Bahá'í world but also to add to that body of knowledge. Awareness of this reality frees one from the fruitless search for a rigid formula for action while still allowing the insights gleaned in diverse settings to inform the process of growth as it takes a particular shape in one's own surroundings. This entire approach is completely at odds with narrow conceptions of “success” and “failure” that breed freneticism or paralyse volition. Detachment is needed. When effort is expended wholly for the sake of God then all that occurs belongs to Him and every victory won in His Name is an occasion to celebrate His praise.

So much in the Writings of our Faith describes the relationship between effort exerted and the heavenly aid vouchsafed in response: “If only ye exert the effort,” is the Master's reassurance in one of His Tablets, “it is certain that these splendours will shine out, these clouds of mercy will shed down their rain, these life-giving winds will rise and blow, this sweet-smelling musk will be scattered far and

wide.” In our frequent visits to the Holy Shrines, we earnestly entreat the Almighty on your behalf that He may sustain and strengthen you, that your endeavours to reach out to those yet unacquainted with the divine teachings and confirm them in His Cause may be richly blessed, and that your reliance on His limitless favours may be unwavering. Never are you absent from our prayers, and never will we cease remembering in our supplications your consecrated acts of faithfulness. As we contemplate the imperatives that lie before the followers of the Blessed Beauty over the next two years, the Master’s emphatic call to action is a spur to the spirit: “Tear asunder the veils, remove the obstacles, proffer the life-giving waters, and point out the path of salvation.”

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

10 July 2014

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The setting of the sun on 20 March 2015 will signalize the end of the year 171, the close of the ninth Váhid of the first Kull-i-Shay' of the Bahá'í Era. We call upon the Bahá'ís of the East and West to adopt, on that auspicious occasion, the provisions that will unite them in the common implementation of the Badí' calendar.

In keeping with the principle governing the gradual unfoldment and progressive application of the Teachings, the provisions of the Badí' calendar have been set forth over time. The Báb introduced the calendar and its broad pattern of periods and cycles, months and days. Bahá'u'lláh provided essential clarifications and additions. Aspects were elucidated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and arrangements for its adoption in the West were put in place at the direction of Shoghi Effendi, as described in the volumes of *The Bahá'í World*. Still, ambiguities surrounding some Islamic and Gregorian dates, as well as difficulties in the correlation of historical observances and astronomical events with explicit statements in the Text, left certain issues unresolved. When responding to questions concerning the calendar, both 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi left these matters to the Universal House of Justice. Of its many features, three require clarification for the calendar's uniform application: the means for the determination of Naw-Rúz, the accommodation of the lunar character of the Twin Holy Birthdays within the solar year, and the fixing of the dates of the Holy Days within the Badí' calendar.

"The Festival of Naw-Rúz falleth on the day that the sun entereth the sign of Aries," Bahá'u'lláh explains in His Most Holy Book, "even should this occur no more than one minute before sunset." However, details have, until now, been left undefined. We have decided that Tíhrán, the birthplace of the Abhá Beauty, will be the spot on the earth that will serve as the standard for determining, by means of astronomical computations from reliable sources, the moment of the vernal equinox in the northern hemisphere and thereby the day of Naw-Rúz for the Bahá'í world.

The Festivals of the Twin Birthdays, the Birth of the Báb and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, have, in the East, been traditionally observed according to their correspondence to the first and second days of Muḥarram in the Islamic calendar. "These two days are accounted as one in the sight of God", Bahá'u'lláh affirms. Yet, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian states, "In the future, no doubt all of the Holy Days will follow the Solar calendar, and provisions be made as to how the Twin Festivals will be celebrated universally." How to satisfy the intrinsic lunar character of these blessed Days within the context of a solar calendar has hitherto been unanswered. We have decided that they will now be observed on the first and the second day following the occurrence of the eighth new moon after Naw-Rúz, as determined in advance by astronomical tables using Tíhrán as the point of reference. This will result in the observance of the Twin Birthdays moving, year to year, within the months of Maṣḥíyyat, 'Ilm, and Quḍrat of the Badí' calendar, or from mid-October to mid-November according to the Gregorian calendar. Next year, the Birth of the Báb will occur on 10 Quḍrat and the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh on 11 Quḍrat. With joy and eager anticipation, we look to the upcoming bicentennial anniversaries of

the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh and the Birth of the Báb, in 174 and 176 B.E., respectively, which the entire Bahá'í world will celebrate according to a common calendar.

The dates of the remaining Holy Days will be fixed within the solar calendar in accordance with explicit statements of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi; we have decided to set aside certain discrepancies in the historical record. The dates are: Naw-Rúz, 1 Bahá; the Festival of Ridván, 13 Jalál to 5 Jamál; the Declaration of the Báb, 8 'Aẓamat; the Ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, 13 'Aẓamat; the Martyrdom of the Báb, 17 Raḥmat; the Day of the Covenant, 4 Qawl; and the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 6 Qawl.

Unless specifically abrogated by these new provisions, previous guidance and clarifications pertaining to the calendar and the observance of the Nineteen Day Feast and Holy Days remain binding, such as the beginning of the day at sunset, the suspension of work, and the hours at which certain Holy Days are commemorated. In future, a change in circumstances may well require additional measures.

It will be evident from the decisions delineated that Bahá'ís of both East and West will find some elements of the calendar to be different from those to which they have been accustomed. The alignment of the dates of the Badí' calendar with other calendars will shift depending on the occurrence of Naw-Rúz. The number of days of Ayyám-i-Há will vary according to the timing of the vernal equinox in successive years; the year commencing on Naw-Rúz 172 B.E. will include four such days. A table prepared at the Bahá'í World Centre that sets out the dates for Naw-Rúz and the Twin Holy Birthdays covering half a century will be provided to all National Spiritual Assemblies in due course.

The adoption of a new calendar in each dispensation is a symbol of the power of Divine Revelation to reshape human perception of material, social, and spiritual reality. Through it, sacred moments are distinguished, humanity's place in time and space reimagined, and the rhythm of life recast. Next Naw-Rúz will mark yet another historic step in the manifestation of the unity of the people of Bahá and the unfoldment of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 August 2014

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Over two years have elapsed since our announcement at Ridván 2012 of projects to raise two national and five local Houses of Worship, to be pursued in conjunction with the construction in Santiago, Chile, of the last of the continental Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs. These undertakings, inextricably linked to the development of community life now being fostered everywhere through acts of devotion and service, are further steps in the sublime task entrusted to humanity by Bahá'u'lláh to build Houses of Worship “throughout the lands in the name of Him Who is the Lord of all religions”—centres in which souls may gather “harmoniously attuned one to another” to hear the divine verses and to offer supplications, and from which “the voices of praise may rise to the Kingdom” and the “fragrance of God” be diffused.

We are deeply moved by the response in every part of the world to our call. Particularly in the nations and localities recently designated for the construction of a House of Worship, we have witnessed the friends' spontaneous expressions of joy; their immediate and heartfelt commitment to lend their share in carrying out the critical work at hand and to increase the dynamism of those activities integral to the emergence of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár within a population; their sacrificial contributions of time, energy, and material resources, in a variety of forms; and their sustained efforts to awaken growing contingents to the vision of those edifices dedicated wholly to the remembrance of God that will be founded in their midst. Indeed, the ready response of the community of the Greatest Name augurs well for its ability to further these collective undertakings.

The National Spiritual Assemblies of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea as well as those of Cambodia, Colombia, India, Kenya, and Vanuatu, with the close support of the Office of Temples and Sites created at the Bahá'í World Centre in 2012, promptly moved forward with the initial preparations. A committee was formed in each country, entrusted with identifying, together with institutions and agencies at all levels of the community, means to promote widespread participation and to channel the enthusiasm engendered among the friends following the announcement of the projects. Another practical step in these national and local projects has been the selection of a suitable piece of land, one which is modest in size, strategically located, and easily accessible. Four of the seven properties are now in hand. A construction office for each project is being established to assist with the management of technical, financial, and legal issues. The work involved in the opening stage has advanced through generous contributions from the friends all over the world to the Temples Fund. Universal and sacrificial support for this Fund will ensure the steady progress of the next phases.

In four countries, the projects have reached the stage of preparing a design for the Temple edifice. This begins with the selection of potential architects and the formulation of an architectural brief defining the requirements for the structure, and it ultimately results in a contract for the final design. Architects are presented with the singular challenge of designing Temples “as perfect as is possible in the world of being” that harmonize naturally with the local culture and the daily lives of those who will gather to pray and meditate therein. The task calls for creativity and skill to combine beauty, grace, and dignity with modesty, functionality, and economy. A number of architects from near and far have gladly

offered their services, and while such contributions are of course welcomed, National Assemblies are giving due regard to the value of engaging architects who are well acquainted with the area where the edifice will be built.

The erection of the continental House of Worship for South America is moving towards its completion in Chile. The steel-frame superstructure has been almost entirely installed, the placement of the interior translucent stone panels is under way, and the landscaping and the construction of auxiliary facilities are progressing according to schedule. The friends in Santiago, supported by others from throughout the Americas, have been diligently striving to prepare the surrounding population for the emergence of the House of Worship; increasing numbers are participating in the community-building endeavours, and a stream of visitors are being welcomed to the Temple site for prayer and discussion on the practical and spiritual dimensions of the enterprise. Measures are currently being put in place in that country in anticipation of the many demands that are sure to arise once the Temple is inaugurated in 2016.

As the friends worldwide rejoice in these heartening advances, their energies remain focused on the processes gaining strength in cluster after cluster. In this, they have not failed to appreciate the dynamic interaction between worship and endeavours to uplift the spiritual, social, and material conditions of society. May all those who are thus labouring in towns and cities, neighbourhoods and villages, derive insights from the exertions made to raise up the first two Houses of Worship at the turn of the twentieth century, in the East and then in the West.

In the city of ‘Ishqábád, a devoted band of believers who settled from Persia, and who, for a time, found peace and tranquillity in Turkistán, bent their energies towards the creation of a pattern of life that would reflect the exalted spiritual and social principles enshrined in the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. In a span of a few decades, this group, originally consisting of a handful of families, was joined there by others and grew to a few thousand believers. This community, fortified by ties of camaraderie and animated by unity of purpose and a spirit of faithfulness, was enabled to reach a high degree of cohesiveness and development, for which it gained renown throughout the Bahá’í world. These friends, guided by their understanding of the divine Teachings, and within the bounds of the religious freedom they were accorded, toiled to create the conditions that would lead to the founding of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, that “crowning institution in every Bahá’í community”. On a befitting tract of land in the centre of the city that had been obtained some years before with the consent of the Blessed Beauty Himself, facilities were built for communal well-being—a meeting hall, schools for children, a hostel for visitors, and a small clinic, among others. A sign of the notable achievements of the Bahá’ís in ‘Ishqábád, who in those productive years became distinguished for their prosperity, magnanimity, and intellectual and cultural attainments, was their attention to ensuring that all Bahá’í children and youth were literate in a society with rampant illiteracy, especially among girls. Within such an environment of unified endeavour and progress, and fostered at every stage of development by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a magnificent House of Worship emerged—the most prominent edifice in the area. For over twenty years, the friends experienced the heavenly joy of having realized their lofty aim: the establishment of a focal point of worship, a nerve centre of community life, a place where souls gathered at daybreak for humble invocation and communion before flowing out of its doors to engage in their daily pursuits. While the forces of irreligion eventually swept through the region and thwarted hopes, the brief appearance of a Mashriqu’l-Adhkár in ‘Ishqábád is an enduring testament to the volition and effort of a body of believers who established a rich pattern of life deriving its impetus from the power of the Creative Word.

In the Western Hemisphere, shortly after work commenced on the House of Worship in ‘Ishqábád, the members of the nascent Bahá’í community in North America were galvanized to demonstrate their faith and devotion by constructing a Temple of their own, and they wrote in 1903 to seek the Master’s consent. From that moment, the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár became inseparably intertwined with the fate of those dedicated servants of Bahá’u’lláh. While progress on this complex project was obstructed over decades by the effects of two world wars and a widespread economic depression, each stage in its development was intimately tied to the expansion of the community and the unfoldment of its administration. On the same day as the interment of the sacred remains of the Báb on Mount Carmel in March 1909, delegates gathered to establish the Bahá’í Temple Unity, a national organization whose elected Board became the nucleus of the far-flung local communities of the continent. This development soon gave rise to the formation of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself laid the cornerstone of the building during His travels to North America, endowing the Mother Temple of the West with tremendous spiritual potentialities. And contributions for this historic enterprise flowed from Bahá’í centres in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific—a demonstration of the solidarity and sacrifice of the Bahá’ís of the East and West.

As the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in every land centre their thoughts on God and occupy themselves each day with His remembrance, ceaselessly exerting effort in His Name, let them draw inspiration from these stirring words addressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to a believer who was devoted to building the first House of Worship, raised under His close and loving direction:

Hasten now to ‘Ishqábád, in the utmost detachment and aflame with the fire of attraction, and convey to the friends of God ardent greetings from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Kiss thou each one’s face and express this servant’s deep and sincere affection to all. Do thou on behalf of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá move the earth, carry the mortar, and haul the stones for the building of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár so that the rapture of this service may bring joy and gladness to the Centre of Servitude. That Mashriqu’l-Adhkár is the first visible and manifest establishment of the Lord. Therefore, it is this servant’s hope that each and every virtuous and righteous soul will sacrifice his all, evince great happiness and exultation, and rejoice in carrying the earth and mortar so that this Divine Edifice may be raised, the Cause of God may spread, and in every corner of the world the friends may arise with the utmost resolve to accomplish this great task. Were ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not imprisoned and were there not obstacles in his path, he himself would assuredly hasten to ‘Ishqábád and carry the earth for the building of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár with the utmost joy and gladness. It behoveth the friends now to arise with this intention in mind and serve in my place so that in a short time this Edifice may be revealed to all eyes, the loved ones of God may engage in making mention of the Abhá Beauty, the melodies of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár may rise at dawn-tide to the Concourse on high, and the songs of the nightingales of God may bring joy and ecstasy to the denizens of the All-Glorious Realm. Thus will the hearts rejoice, the souls delight in joyful tidings, and the minds be illumined. This is the highest hope of the sincere ones; this is the dearest wish of them that are nigh unto God.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

1 October 2014

To the Bahá'ís of Iran,

Papua New Guinea comprises a group of islands in the vast expanse of the waters of the Pacific, far, far away from the Cradle of the Faith. We recently learned that your sacrifices have so inspired the believers in that vibrant Bahá'í community in their highly energetic response to the exigencies of the Five Year Plan that a group of them are working to make a television program to bring to the attention of their compatriots the suffering that their deeply cherished fellow believers in Iran endure because of their adherence to the Cause. In so many ways that extraordinary region, Australasia—where, before long, four Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs will shine out as beacons of the light of divine guidance and as testaments to the magnificent response of its population to Bahá'u'lláh's call for unity and peace—is the embodiment of this emphatic promise by the Abhá Beauty regarding His Cause: “Should they attempt to conceal its light on the continent, it will assuredly rear its head in the midmost heart of the ocean, and, raising its voice, proclaim: ‘I am the life-giver of the world!’”

To be sure, there are those who wish to conceal this light—indeed to snuff it out—in the land where it was first kindled and shrink at nothing to this end. In recent months, there has been a marked increase in calumnies and lies, misinformation and untruths about the Cause. How utterly futile are their efforts! For the expenditure of energy and fortune on systematic campaigns to propagate falsehoods about your beliefs has, as you know, led to an upsurge in interest to study the Bahá'í teachings and its history. Consider for a moment the reason for the rise in this interest. It is, of course, a well-known fact that when searching for the truth of a matter, one cannot limit oneself to the study of the statements of its detractors; for an unbiased judgment, the original source must be investigated. Consider what lies and calumnies have for 1,400 years been propagated by the enemies of Islam. Is the truth of the Faith of the Prophet Muḥammad to be judged by the protestations of His enemies or by immersion in and reflection on the ocean of the sacred Word revealed to Him by God?

Regrettably, in your land, truth has become a flexible plaything in the hands of those who are drunk on worldly power. So institutionalized has lying become in official circles that statements made by the authorities increasingly lack any credibility. This is in sharp contrast to the way in which your compatriots are able, with growing clarity, to see and understand your posture. For the sake of upholding the truth and not uttering a simple false statement about your belief that would open up to you every social and economic opportunity, you maintain your integrity and refuse to deny or dissimulate your faith. Among your fellow citizens and on the international stage, this commitment to truthfulness has won for you high standing and immeasurable praise. Little wonder, then, that some of those who attack the Faith in the virtual space now pretend to speak in the voice of the Bahá'ís. Knowing that the words of your avowed adversaries are devoid of any credibility, these hapless antagonists attempt to sow dissension in your midst by commandeering your voice so as to use its moral authority, won by your honesty, to undermine your unity. This effort is so transparent that none take it seriously, but it is an indication of the desperation and frustration of those who oppose you.

This same deceitful attitude is in evidence in the manner in which Bahá'í youth are denied higher education. Every year a new ruse is used to deceive; this year was no exception. But the diligence with

which the Bahá'í youth in Iran, despite every obstacle, continue to pursue justice and seek knowledge has again won the admiration of the people of the world and their governments. Whether in the determination and integrity of the young student who, having passed the entrance exam, demands evidence to know why she is being denied her right to higher education; whether in the heartrending lines written by a child in defense of her sister against manifest injustice; whether in the fearless audacity and resolve evinced by the concerned father who travels hundreds of miles to set forth the truth to those in seats of power; or whether in the gestures of support and solidarity from your compatriots—in all your countless other unmarked acts of fidelity and steadfastness, as well as in acts of nobility and valor on the part of the people of Iran, a unique and instructive account is being written in deeds. Yet your actions are not confined to efforts to seek justice.

Your unrelenting pursuit of knowledge is perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of constructive resilience in the modern age. In a world where education is not immune from the forces that promote a materialistic conception of human life, and where, for some, university degrees have become commoditized, your admirable pursuit of learning for its own sake, for the sake of the powers of the human mind that it enhances and the capacities for service that it develops, stands in sharp contrast. But what is all the more remarkable is that this attitude, this understanding, this value you rightfully attach to learning is not confined to a certain small section of your community. The imperative to educate is a central concern for your young and old alike; for the students, certainly, but also for those who risk their all to teach and impart knowledge, for those who organize educational endeavors, for those parents who sacrificially ensure their children are able to continue their education, for those who generously offer hospitality, for those who pray for this effort and wish it well, and for countless others who in a myriad other ways make this collective act possible. This resolute spirit and these selfless deeds deserve the highest praise.

Reflect upon the destructive forces at work that are destabilizing equilibrium across the face of the globe, including the situation that prevails in your own land. Power is seized and exercised in a manner that twists or obscures the truth to serve the special interests of the few at the expense of the many. Fanaticism is unleashed in the name of religion, such that it distorts human behavior and promotes social strife in a manner that stands in stark contrast to the spiritual qualities and social well-being which the Messengers of God sacrificed themselves to foster. Materialism dulls the human spirit, trapping that bird, which should soar in the heavens, in the mire of self-indulgence and animalistic tendencies. As human beings are buffeted by these forces, they long for truth and that which is right and become impelled to discover a way out of this morass. Inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, you stand against such negative forces, you respond to this search for truth, and together with others of like mind you serve the process of the construction of a just and peaceful world. Praised be God that you are engaged in carrying out the admonitions of your Beloved. Continue then with confidence on your path. Challenged by self-serving power, pursue the acquisition of knowledge; in the face of fanaticism, build unity, and combat prejudices of all kinds; in response to enmity and hatred, offer love and show mercy and compassion; rather than surrendering to consumerism, live a selfless life of service and use your resources for the betterment of the world. Consort in fellowship and work with all who strive for these noble aims.

This prayer of the Master describes well your state and expresses the sentiments of our hearts: O Divine Providence! This assemblage is composed of Thy friends who are attracted to Thy beauty and are set ablaze by the fire of Thy love. Turn these souls into heavenly angels, resuscitate them through the breath of Thy Holy Spirit, grant them eloquent tongues and resolute hearts, bestow upon them

heavenly power and merciful susceptibilities, cause them to become the promulgators of the oneness of mankind and the cause of love and concord in the world of humanity, so that the perilous darkness of ignorant prejudice may vanish through the light of the Sun of Truth, this dreary world may become illumined, this material realm may absorb the rays of the world of spirit, these different colors may merge into one color and the melody of praise may rise to the kingdom of Thy sanctity. Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent and the Almighty!

The Universal House of Justice

Riḍván 2015

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The resplendent season of Riḍván is at hand, and from the heights to which the community of the Greatest Name has attained, bright prospects are visible on the horizon. A vast terrain has been traversed: new programmes of growth have appeared, and while hundreds more must still emerge in the next twelve months, efforts to set in motion the necessary pattern of activity have already begun in almost every one of the clusters required to reach the 5,000 called for in the Five Year Plan. Existing programmes are gaining in strength, many showing more clearly what it means for the Cause of God to extend further into the social landscape across a cluster and within a neighbourhood or village. The paths that lead to sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation are being followed with firmer footsteps, valiant youth often setting the pace. Ways in which the society-building power of the Faith can find release in various settings are becoming more apparent, and those defining features that must come to mark the further unfoldment of the growth process in a cluster are becoming gradually discernible.

The call to carry out and support this work is directed to every follower of Bahá'u'lláh, and it will evoke a response in every heart that aches at the wretched condition of the world, the lamentable circumstances from which so many people are unable to gain relief. For, ultimately, it is systematic, determined, and selfless action undertaken within the wide embrace of the Plan's framework that is the most constructive response of every concerned believer to the multiplying ills of a disordered society. Over the last year, it has become clearer still that, in different nations in different ways, the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people is increasingly worn and spent. It can no longer offer a reliable defence against a variety of self-serving, intolerant, and toxic ideologies that feed upon discontent and resentment. With a conflicted world appearing every day less sure of itself, the proponents of these destructive doctrines grow bold and brazen. We recall the unequivocal verdict from the Supreme Pen: "They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light." Well-meaning leaders of nations and people of goodwill are left struggling to repair the fractures evident in society and powerless to prevent their spread. The effects of all this are not only to be seen in outright conflict or a collapse in order. In the distrust that pits neighbour against neighbour and severs family ties, in the antagonism of so much of what passes for social discourse, in the casualness with which appeals to ignoble human motivations are used to win power and pile up riches—in all these lie unmistakable signs that the moral force which sustains society has become gravely depleted.

Yet there is reassurance in the knowledge that, amidst the disintegration, a new kind of collective life is taking shape which gives practical expression to all that is heavenly in human beings. We have observed how, especially in those places where intensity in teaching and community-building activities has been maintained, the friends have been able to guard themselves against the forces of materialism that risk sapping their precious energies. Not only that, but in managing the various other calls upon their time, they never lose sight of the sacred and pressing tasks before them. Such attentiveness to the

needs of the Faith and to humanity's best interests is required in every community. Where a programme of growth has been established in a previously unopened cluster, we see how the initial stirrings of activity arise out of the love for Bahá'u'lláh held in the heart of a committed believer. Notwithstanding the orders of complexity that must eventually be accommodated as a community grows in size, all activity begins with this simple strand of love. It is the vital thread from which is woven a pattern of patient and concentrated effort, cycle after cycle, to introduce children, youth, and adults to spiritual ideas; to foster a feeling for worship through gatherings for prayer and devotion; to stimulate conversations that illuminate understanding; to start ever-growing numbers on a lifetime of study of the Creative Word and its translation into deeds; to develop, along with others, capacity for service; and to accompany one another in the exercise of what has been learned. Beloved friends, loved ones of the Abhá Beauty: We pray for you in earnest on every occasion we present ourselves at His Holy Threshold, that your love for Him may give you the strength to consecrate your lives to His Cause.

The rich insights arising from clusters, and from centres of intense activity within them, where the dynamics of community life have embraced large numbers of people deserve special mention. We are gratified to see how a culture of mutual support, founded on fellowship and humble service, has quite naturally established itself in such quarters, enabling more and more souls to be systematically brought within the pale of the community's activities. Indeed, in an increasing number of settings the movement of a population towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision for a new society appears no longer merely as an enthralling prospect but as an emerging reality.

We wish to address some additional words to those of you in whose surroundings marked progress is yet to occur and who long for change. Have hope. It will not always be so. Is not the history of our Faith filled with accounts of inauspicious beginnings but marvellous results? How many times have the deeds of a few believers—young or old—or of a single family, or even of a lone soul, when confirmed by the power of divine assistance, succeeded in cultivating vibrant communities in seemingly inhospitable climes? Do not imagine that your own case is inherently any different. Change in a cluster, be it swift or hard won, flows neither from a formulaic approach nor from random activity; it proceeds to the rhythm of action, reflection, and consultation, and is propelled by plans that are the fruit of experience. Beyond this, and whatever its immediate effects, service to the Beloved is, in itself, a source of abiding joy to the spirit. Take heart, too, from the example of your spiritual kin in the Cradle of the Faith, how their constructive outlook, their resilience as a community, and their steadfastness in promoting the Divine Word are bringing about change in their society at the level of thought and deed. God is with you, with each of you. In the twelve months that remain of the Plan, let every community advance from its present position to a stronger one.

The all-important work of expansion and consolidation lays a solid foundation for the endeavours the Bahá'í world is being called to undertake in numerous other spheres. At the Bahá'í World Centre, efforts are intensifying to methodically catalogue and index the content of the thousands of Tablets which constitute that infinitely precious bequest, the Holy Texts of our Faith, held in trust for the benefit of all humankind—this, so as to accelerate the publication of volumes of the Writings, both in their original languages and in English translation. Endeavours to establish eight Mashriqu'l-Adhikárs, sacred Fanés raised up to the glory of God, continue apace. External affairs work at the national level has gained markedly in effectiveness and become increasingly systematic, further stimulated by the release of a document, sent to National Spiritual Assemblies six months ago, which draws on the considerable experience generated over the last two decades and provides an expanded framework for developing these endeavours in the future. Meanwhile, two new Offices of the Bahá'í International

Community, sisters to its United Nations Office based in New York and Geneva and to its Office in Brussels, have been opened in Addis Ababa and Jakarta, broadening the opportunities for the perspectives of the Cause to be offered at the international level in Africa and Southeast Asia. Often prompted by the demands of growth, a range of National Assemblies are building up their administrative capacity, visible in their thoughtful stewardship of the resources available to them, their efforts to become intimately familiar with the conditions of their communities, and their vigilance in ensuring that the operations of their National Offices grow ever stronger; the need to systematize the impressive body of knowledge now accumulating in this area has led to the creation at the World Centre of the Office for the Development of Administrative Systems. Initiatives for social action of various kinds continue to multiply in many countries, enabling much to be learned about how the wisdom enshrined in the Teachings can be applied to improve social and economic circumstances; so promising is this field that we have established a seven-member International Advisory Board to the Office of Social and Economic Development, introducing the next stage in the evolution of that Office. Three members of the Board will also serve as the Office's coordinating team and be resident in the Holy Land.

At this Rīdván, then, while we see much to be done, we see many ready to do it. In thousands of clusters, neighbourhoods, and villages, fresh springs of faith and assurance are pouring forth, cheering the spirits of those touched by their reviving waters. In places, the flow is a steady stream, in some, already a river. Now is not the moment for any soul to linger upon the bank—let all lend themselves to the onward surge.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

29 December 2015

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

The Plan upon which the Bahá'í world embarked nearly five years ago is in its closing stages; the final tally of its accomplishments grows still, but will soon be sealed. The collective effort it inspired has called for wholehearted reliance on those powers with which a benevolent Lord has endowed His loved ones. Gathered with you at this moment of reflection, we are conscious of a determination among the friends to bring the current Plan to a fitting conclusion, and of an eagerness to advance further along the path that experience has marked out.

The considerable distance already travelled along that path is evident from the present Plan's most striking outcomes. The ambitious goal of raising to 5,000 the number of clusters where a programme of growth, at whatever level of intensity, is under way looks set to be achieved in the months that remain before Riqdán 2016. In many scores of clusters, there are over a thousand inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—taking part in a well-established pattern of activity that embraces ever-larger numbers, raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Worldwide, half a million individuals have now been enabled to complete at least the first book in the sequence of courses, an extraordinary feat that has laid a sure foundation for the system of human resource development. A generation of youth is being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world. Marvelling at what they have seen, leaders of society in certain places are pressing the Bahá'ís to make their programmes for educating the young widely available. Faced with increasing complexity, Bahá'í institutions and their agencies are finding ways to organize the activities of rising numbers of friends by promoting collaboration and mutual support. And the capacity for learning, which represented such a priceless legacy of previous Plans, is being extended beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass other areas of Bahá'í endeavour, notably social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. We see a community fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unrelenting effort focused on a common aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

That this process must go much further, there can be no doubt; nevertheless, developments demonstrate that a significant advance has already occurred. It has prepared the friends of God for a more exacting test of their capabilities, one that will also make great demands of your institution as you rally them to meet its requirements. In this coming Plan, which will conclude at the threshold of the second century of the Formative Age of the Faith, we will call the believers everywhere to the immense exertion necessary to bring to fruition the seeds that have been so lovingly and assiduously sown and watered in the five Plans that preceded it.

The emergence of a programme of growth

The unfoldment of the process of growth in a cluster, while naturally possessing unique features in every instance shaped by the receptivity of those who are exposed to the divine teachings, conforms to

certain shared characteristics. Many of these were discussed in our message to your 2010 conference, in which reference was made to a series of milestones that mark progress along a path of development. A collective understanding of what is required for the friends in a cluster to pass the first of the milestones we described, and then the second, has grown over this period.

In the Five Year Plan now ending, the task facing the believers has been to apply all that had been learned from previous Plans to the work of extending the process of growth to thousands of new clusters. What this has shown is that much depends on the ability of the institutions to draw on help from friends in other clusters, reinforcing the actions of an existing Bahá'í community by, for example, arranging the support of visiting teaching teams or tutors. In many places, the institute process begins with the assistance of believers from stronger neighbouring communities who find creative ways of reaching out to the local population, youth in particular, and supporting them as they start to engage in service. Efforts to stimulate activity in a cluster, especially one that has not yet been opened to the Faith, are greatly enhanced if one or more individuals settle there as homefront pioneers, concentrating their attention on part of a village or even a single street where there is heightened receptivity. Well over 4,500 believers have already arisen to serve in this way during the present Plan, an astonishing accomplishment.

Whatever the combination of strategies used, the chief aim is to initiate a process for building capacity within the cluster through which its inhabitants, prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, are enabled to begin offering acts of service. Once this fundamental requirement is met, a programme of growth has emerged. Essential, of course, is the support of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, whose close involvement from the first stirrings of activity helps the friends to maintain a clear and united vision of what is needed.

Strengthening the pattern of action

Before long, there forms a nucleus of friends in a cluster who are working and consulting together and arranging activities. For the process of growth to advance further, the number of people sharing this commitment must rise, and their capacity for undertaking systematic action within the framework of the Plan must correspondingly increase. And similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place.

Foremost among these conditions is an institute process gaining in strength, given its centrality to fostering the movement of populations. The friends who have begun studying institute materials, and are also investing their energies in organizing children's classes, junior youth groups, gatherings for collective worship, or other related activities, are being assisted to proceed further through the sequence of courses, while the number of those starting their study continues to rise. With the flow of participants through institute courses and into the field of action being maintained, the company of those who are sustaining the growth process expands. Progress relies to a large extent on the quality of the efforts of those serving as tutors. At this early stage, most of them might still be drawn from other clusters, but at the same time, a few local friends are being raised up who, as their capacity for action increases, begin to help others study the materials of the institute. Efforts to usher in the first cadre of tutors from the cluster should steer a path between two undesirable outcomes. If individuals proceed through the courses of the institute too hastily, the capacity to serve is not sufficiently developed; conversely, if study is overly prolonged, the process is robbed of the dynamism essential to its advancement. In differing circumstances, creative solutions have been used to achieve the necessary

balance, ensuring that, within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors.

Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with some experience increases consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time. Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path.

Where the institute is concerned, the flow of participants through its courses creates a growing need for them to be systematically supported as they begin serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors. Opportunities naturally arise for those among the core of believers who have already gained a measure of experience in the educational activities to assist those who are newer to them. An individual's readiness to help others move forward in their efforts to serve might lead to specific responsibilities being assigned to him or her. In this manner, coordinators of each of the three stages of the educational process gradually emerge as needs demand. Their actions are always motivated by a desire to see capacity develop in others and to foster friendships founded on cooperation and reciprocity.

Clearly, the institute process raises capacity for a broad range of undertakings; from the earliest courses, participants are encouraged to visit their friends at their homes and study a prayer together or share with them a theme from the Bahá'í teachings. Arrangements for supporting the friends in these endeavours, which may have been largely informal, eventually prove inadequate, signalling the need for an Area Teaching Committee to appear. Its principal focus is the mobilization of individuals, often through the formation of teams, for the continued spread of the pattern of activity in a cluster. Its members come to see everyone as a potential collaborator in a collective enterprise, and they appreciate their own part in nurturing a spirit of common purpose in the community. With a Committee in place, the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for worship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably. You will need to encourage National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, as much as training institutes, to remain alert to when conditions in a cluster call for organizational arrangements to assume a definite shape—neither acting prematurely nor unduly delaying the appearance of formal structures.

Just like individuals, the agencies emerging in a cluster need assistance as they take up their duties. The help that Auxiliary Board members provide in this regard is essential, but it is also an important responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils or, where no Council exists, of the National Spiritual Assembly itself, and it is a pressing concern for training institutes as well. The capacity to serve ably at the cluster level increases when spaces are created in which the believers involved can study guidance, reflect on their actions in its light and draw insights therefrom, and also become connected with the wider body of knowledge being generated in surrounding clusters and further afield. Instead of formulating plans in the abstract, consultations conducted in such spaces often aim at capturing the reality of the cluster at that particular moment and identifying the immediate next steps to facilitate progress. Those serving at the regional or national level may do much to advise the friends and expand

their vision of what can be accomplished, but they would not seek to impose their own expectations on the planning process; rather, they are helping the believers who are labouring in a cluster to gradually enhance their ability to devise and implement a course of action informed by the experience accumulating at the grassroots of the community and familiarity with actual conditions. In order to develop the capacity of cluster agencies to learn and to act systematically, regional and national institutions need to be conscientious and methodical in their own efforts to assist them. Your auxiliaries' support for this work will ensure that each element of the growth process attains the requisite characteristics and that the integrity and coherence of all the endeavours are maintained.

The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated.

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. What is clear, then, is that as the institute process in a cluster gains momentum, the act of teaching comes to assume greater prominence in the lives of the friends.

As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes. The actions undertaken during this phase allow abilities developed through studying the relevant institute materials to be exercised and refined. As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more

direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause. The approach of working in teams allows the friends to serve together, offer mutual support, and build confidence—but even when carrying out actions individually, they are coordinating their efforts to greater effect. Their focus and investment of time endow this short but decisive phase of the cycle with the intensity it demands. This spirit of high resolve serves to multiply the community's powers, and in each cycle the friends learn to depend more and more on the potent confirmations from the divine realm that their actions attract.

Five years ago, most of the clusters where an intensive programme of growth had been established were those where a reasonable number of Bahá'ís already lived, often geographically spread out. Efforts on the part of those believers to advance the work by inviting the participation of friends, co-workers, extended family, and acquaintances did much to raise the level of activity throughout the cluster. Indeed, widening the circle of participation in this way has become a familiar aspect of Bahá'í life and remains essential. At the same time, experience indicates that, for growth to accelerate through a steady flow of new participants entering the institute process, more is required. The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible.

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. Over time, the cluster as a whole and its centres of intense activity will infuse one another with the heightened understanding that comes from efforts to apply the teachings in different contexts.

As the friends in a cluster continue to reinforce and expand the community-building activities taking shape around them, it becomes evident that distinctive progress has been made. All the elements of a system necessary for growth to be sustained are now in place. Reaching the second milestone along the continuum of development, which we described to you five years ago, is accompanied by advances qualitative, but also quantitative—such as a rise in the number of those involved in conversations that enable receptivity to be discovered and nurtured, in how many homes are being visited, in core activities and participation, in how many individuals are beginning the sequence of courses or

supporting others as they gain the confidence to serve. Attendance at gatherings to mark the Nineteen Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Days is being fostered by Local Spiritual Assemblies. Such advances are the more visible signs of a much finer development: the gradual spread, within a population, of a pattern of community life based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And, naturally, the number of believers grows.

In the last five years, the path that leads to the emergence of an intensive programme of growth has become more readily discernible. It must be earnestly pursued. In the Plan that will commence this Ridván, we are calling for growth to be accelerated in all clusters where it has begun. Notwithstanding the natural ebb and flow characteristic of an organic process, there should appear a clear arc of progress over the course of twenty cycles. This combined effort should seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Ridván 2021.

We set this objective before the Bahá'í world conscious that it is truly formidable; that a herculean labour will be required; that many sacrifices will have to be made. But faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá'u'lláh's elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers. God willing, their exertions will prove worthy to crown a hundred years of toil and set the stage for exploits as yet unimagined that must adorn the second century of the Formative Age.

In the coming months, you will be initiating consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies to assess with them the implications that this global goal holds for their respective communities, a process of consultation which has to be quickly extended until it reaches the grassroots. Action must then ensue. We anticipate that progress will be more swiftly achieved in regions where one or more intensive programmes of growth have been sustained for some time, as these offer a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources as efforts are made to strengthen surrounding areas. Pursuit of this goal will also result in the emergence of new programmes of growth, often in unopened clusters that neighbour those where a significant advance has occurred. Such a flow of assistance finds its origin in the imperatives laid out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

Embracing large numbers and managing complexity

Whereas, when a programme of growth is nascent in a cluster, there might be a handful of individuals who are involved in its promotion and those who are participating might come from only several households, by the time a programme has become intensive, these figures, as one would expect, have grown: perhaps tens of individuals active in the work of expansion and consolidation, while those participating might well surpass a hundred. But being able to reach out to large numbers—mobilizing a hundred people or more, whose service connects them with many hundreds or even thousands—requires the capacity to adapt to a substantial increase in complexity.

As the growth process continues to gain intensity, the friends' efforts to engage in meaningful conversations bring them into many social spaces, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the teachings and consider seriously the contribution they can make to the betterment of society. In addition, more and more homes are provided as venues for community-building activities, making each a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance. The institute process comes to be supported by a growing number of friends serving capably as tutors who, cycle after cycle, offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity. Thus, human resource development proceeds with minimal interruption and generates a constantly expanding pool of workers. While it continues to draw on a diverse range of the cluster's inhabitants, those taking its

courses in the greatest numbers are often the youth. The transformative effect of studying the Word of God is experienced by the many whose lives are touched in some way by the community's activities. And as the flow of people beginning a path of service swells, considerable progress is made in all aspects of the community-building efforts of the friends. Animators of junior youth groups and teachers of children's classes multiply in number, fuelling an expansion of these two vital programmes. Children are enabled to move from one grade of the classes to another, while groups of junior youth progress from year to year and ground their learning in service to society. Cluster agencies, bolstered by the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies, encourage and foster the natural passage of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next. An educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers, is now firmly rooted within the cluster.

This kind of progress requires the concerted efforts of the friends wherever in the cluster they reside. Nevertheless, experience in the present Plan demonstrates that a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages—places where the convergence of spiritual forces is effecting rapid change within a body of people—to the point where they can sustain intense activity. A core of individuals from within each is assuming responsibility for the process of building capacity in its inhabitants. A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. The friends in such locations help the cluster agencies extend the growth process to different parts of the cluster, for they are eager to introduce others to the vision of transformation they have themselves already glimpsed.

In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics involved when a population of this kind embraces the Faith and is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

As growth in the cluster advances further, greater demands are being placed on the organizational scheme of the training institute. Additional coordinators are now required, some of whom might focus their efforts on a particular part of the cluster. However, this need not result in another layer of administration. Much can be achieved through collaboration, as coordinators start to work together in teams, sometimes drawing on the help of other capable individuals. The ongoing interactions and exchange of experience within these teams constantly enriches understanding and increases the efficacy of their service. The coordinators are also discovering that their efforts can be much enhanced

if the friends serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors who live in close proximity to one another are able to meet in small groups, in the settings where they serve, and assist each other.

Meanwhile, the Area Teaching Committee is rising to a new level of functioning. It is engaged in a more thorough reading of circumstances in the whole cluster: on the one hand, accurately assessing the capacities of the community and the effects being produced by sustained growth, and on the other, understanding the implications of various social realities for community building in the long term. In the plans it makes each cycle, the Committee relies heavily on those shouldering the greatest share of the work of expansion and consolidation, but given that the number of those connected in some way with the pattern of activity is now large, a variety of questions become more pressing: how to mobilize the entire company of believers in support of teaching goals; how to organize systematic home visits to the friends who would benefit from deepening and discussions that connect them with the community; how to strengthen spiritual bonds with the parents of children and junior youth; how to build on the interest of those who have shown goodwill towards the Faith but have yet to take part in its activities. Promoting the widespread holding of devotional meetings is another concern, so that hundreds of people, eventually thousands, are engaged in worship in the company of their households and their neighbours. Ultimately, of course, the Committee looks to continually extend the reach of the community's endeavours so that more and more souls become acquainted with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analysing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members. These complexities also require increasingly close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality. The Assembly is also attentive to the need for new believers to be nurtured sensitively, considering when and how various dimensions of community life are to be introduced to them. By encouraging their involvement in institute courses, it aims to ensure that from the very beginning they regard themselves as protagonists in a noble endeavour to build the world anew. It sees to it that gatherings for the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day commemorations, and Bahá'í elections become opportunities to reinforce the high ideals of the community, strengthen its shared sense of commitment, and fortify its spiritual character. As numbers in the community grow larger, the Assembly gives thought to when it could be beneficial to decentralize such meetings so as to facilitate ever-greater participation on these important occasions.

A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity. The cluster-wide reflection meeting, at which so much of this learning is presented, is often complemented by meetings for smaller areas, which generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending. This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent from cycle to cycle—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their spiritual development over generations to

come. And as they do so, the support they receive from regional and national Bahá'í institutions and their agencies is experienced as an unceasing flow of love.

A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

For the movement of a population to have come this far demonstrates that the process which brought it about is strong enough to achieve and sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed. This is another milestone for the friends to pass, the third in succession since the process of growth in a cluster was begun. It denotes the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation. This has already come about in around two hundred clusters, covering a range of socio-economic circumstances, and we anticipate that, by the conclusion of the coming Plan, it will be observable in several hundred more. It is a future to which the friends labouring in thousands of clusters elsewhere can aspire.

In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived. Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

We recognize that developments like these are yet a distant prospect for many, even in clusters where the pattern of activity embraces large numbers. But in some places, this is the work of the moment. In such clusters, while the friends continue to be occupied with sustaining the process of growth, other dimensions of Bahá'í endeavour claim an increasing share of their attention. They are seeking to understand how a flourishing local population can transform the society of which it is an integral part. This will be a new frontier of learning for the foreseeable future, where insights will be generated that will ultimately benefit the whole Bahá'í world.

Releasing the potential of the youth

The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan. If any proof were needed of the extraordinary potential that the youth possess, it has been incontrovertibly delivered. In the wake of the youth conferences convened in 2013, the surge of energy which was imparted to the work being carried out in clusters demonstrates clearly how the community of the Greatest Name is able to give shape to the highest aspirations of young people. How pleased we are to see that, following the participation of more than 80,000 youth in these conferences, an additional cohort of over 100,000 have joined them in taking part in numerous encounters held since then. Measures to encourage the full engagement of these growing contingents in the activities of the community must constitute a major component of the new Plan.

The enthusiastic participation of the youth also highlighted the fact that they represent a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out. What has been learned in this regard is how to help young people become aware of the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society. As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way. Conversations along these lines kindle interest in how the physical and spiritual powers available to them at this time of life can be channelled towards providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations. Special gatherings for youth, now occurring more frequently at the level of the cluster and even the neighbourhood or village, have proved to be ideal occasions for bringing an intensity to this ongoing conversation, and they are an increasingly common feature of cycles of activity in many clusters.

Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of “doing”, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of “being”, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life. And so it is that, having been introduced to the vision of the Faith for humanity and the exalted character of its mission, the youth naturally feel a desire to be of service, a desire to which training institutes swiftly respond. Indeed, releasing the capacity of the youth is, for each training institute, a sacred charge. Yet fostering that capacity as it develops is a responsibility of every institution of the Cause. The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another’s efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides

young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

As youth advance along the path of service, their endeavours are integrated seamlessly into the activities of the cluster, and as a consequence, the entire community thrives as a cohesive whole. Reaching out to the families of young people is a natural way of strengthening community building. Institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth. With a greater awareness of this age group's circumstances and dynamics, they are able to plan accordingly—for instance, providing opportunities for youth to study courses intensively, perhaps immediately upon the conclusion of a youth gathering. The infusion of energy from a vibrant band of youth allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.

While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá'u'lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother's milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus. We rely on you and your auxiliaries to ensure that the spiritual and material prospects of the youth are given due weight in the deliberations of families, communities, agencies, and institutions.

Enhancing institutional capacity

The demands of the present Plan—establishing thousands of new programmes of growth and fortifying existing ones—required from national and regional institutions, as well as yourselves, a feat of strength and coordination. Meeting them was made possible through a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan's three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions. This spirit was the prerequisite for every important undertaking, including special initiatives to settle pioneers in selected

countries and, of course, the organization of 114 youth conferences. A prevalent attitude of joyful service, flexibility, and detachment from personal preferences lent even routine administrative activities a sacred quality. The fresh demands of the coming Plan will, undoubtedly, test the capacity of Bahá'í institutions further still, but no matter what, they will surely preserve this unified spirit among all who work together.

As indicated earlier, the movement of clusters along a continuum depends on there being a commitment from the institutions to guide and support cluster agencies and provide resources as necessary. This work is a critical responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils and regional training institutes. The number of Councils in the world rose from 170 to 203 in the last five years, reflecting the growing need and the rising capacity for work to be undertaken at this level, and in some countries where Councils are yet to be formed, specific steps were taken to build experience in anticipation of their emergence, such as the appointment of regional teams. In some regions that stretch across a large territory, Councils have made arrangements for nurturing the development of groups of adjoining clusters. Meanwhile, in smaller countries that do not require the establishment of Regional Councils, National Assemblies are increasingly giving thought to ways of helping clusters advance, in some instances by forming a working group charged with this task; you are encouraged to stimulate learning in this area, with the aim that, in due course, formal structures can be defined that would assume this responsibility in much the same way that Councils do in other countries. And, as is the case with Councils, we envisage that any such structure which emerges at the national level will benefit from interaction with the institution of the Counsellors.

To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee. Timely access to information about the movement of clusters and the work of the institute in their jurisdictions is required for institutions to support their agencies and take the many decisions that concern, for instance, the deployment of pioneers, the allocation of funds, the creation and promotion of Bahá'í literature, and the planning of institutional meetings; it allows them to accurately read the reality of their communities and act on the basis of clearly understood needs when marshalling the energies of the friends towards meeting the exigencies of the hour. At various intervals a National Assembly, in consultation with you, may find it advisable to formally adopt and disseminate certain aspects of the lessons that have been learned, especially in relation to organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

Of course, a National Spiritual Assembly ultimately has responsibility for fostering all aspects of a Bahá'í community's development. Although it pursues various lines of action itself, in many cases it fulfils this responsibility by ensuring that Regional Councils or specialized agencies are able to take steps to advance areas of endeavour entrusted to them. As the capacity of the friends increases and the size of a community grows, the work of a National Assembly in its manifold dimensions becomes commensurately more complex. Therefore, and in view of the magnitude of the task before the institutions in the coming Plan, National Assemblies—as well as Councils—will benefit from periodically considering, in collaboration with you, whether their administrative operations, and

indeed elements of their own functioning, could be adjusted or enhanced in ways that would better support the growth process.

Attaining a higher level of functioning is similarly a pressing concern of training institutes. The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising. While it is important that institutes attend to day-to-day operational matters, the scale of what must be accomplished requires that they also become occupied with considerations of strategy. Training institute boards need to maintain an ongoing consultation with national or regional coordinators, as well as with Auxiliary Board members, about how an activity in a cluster gains strength, how it can be adequately resourced, what approaches prove effective in different settings, and how experience can be shared. We have in mind a systematic and concentrated effort by this collaborative group to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Addressing other dimensions of the institute's work—such as schemes of coordination at the cluster level, enhancing the capacity of coordinators, and the management of statistics and finances—will be essential too. In your work with training institutes, you will no doubt wish to arrange that they draw on the experience of other institutes in the same part of the world. Sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme also offer a rich source of insight for the institutes of nearby countries or regions.

As institutions and agencies seek to accelerate the processes of expansion and consolidation in every land, the question of financial resources will surely claim increased attention. Indeed, an important aspect of enhancing institutional capacity over the coming years will be the ongoing development of local and national Funds. For this to occur, the generality of the friends must be invited to consider afresh the responsibility of all believers to support the work of the Faith through their own means and, further, to manage their financial affairs in the light of the teachings.

The future civilization envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh is a prosperous one, in which the vast resources of the world will be directed towards humanity's elevation and regeneration, not its debasement and destruction. The act of contributing to the Fund, then, is imbued with profound meaning: it is a practical way of hastening the advent of that civilization, and a necessary one, for as Bahá'u'lláh Himself has explained, "He Who is the Eternal Truth—exalted be His glory—hath made the fulfilment of every undertaking on earth dependent on material means." Bahá'ís conduct their lives in the midst of a society acutely disordered in its material affairs. The process of community building they are advancing in their clusters cultivates a set of attitudes towards wealth and possessions very different from those holding sway in the world. The habit of regularly giving to the Funds of the Faith—including in-kind contributions particularly in certain places—arises from and reinforces a sense of personal concern for the welfare of the community and the progress of the Cause. The duty to contribute, just like the duty to teach, is a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í identity which strengthens faith. The sacrificial and generous contributions of the individual believer, the collective consciousness promoted by the community of the needs of the Fund, and the careful stewardship of financial resources exercised by the institutions of the Faith can be regarded as expressions of the love that binds these three actors more closely together. And ultimately, voluntary giving fosters an awareness that managing one's financial affairs in accordance with spiritual principles is an indispensable dimension of a life lived coherently. It

is a matter of conscience, a way in which commitment to the betterment of the world is translated into practice.

We direct these statements to you in recognition of the unique responsibility that you, your deputies, and their assistants shoulder in helping the friends to advance their understanding in numerous areas, not least, of course, with respect to the dynamics of growth. As we have previously indicated, in the institution of the Counsellors the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part. As a progressively deeper understanding of the Five Year Plan emerges among the believers over time, insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared. In this regard, an immense debt of gratitude is owed by the community of the Greatest Name to the International Teaching Centre, which has done so much in recent years, and with such diligence, to lovingly nurture and energetically promulgate a mode of learning that has now become well established.

The essential elements of the coming Plan, like those that came before it, are straightforward. Nevertheless, a profound understanding of its various facets requires an appreciation of the sophisticated set of operations through which a cluster develops. We rely on your institution being so familiar with the relevant guidance that the friends in general, and institutions and their agencies in particular, can depend on you to illuminate their deliberations by calling attention to pertinent considerations. Clearly, however, the need to assist the friends in at least 5,000 clusters where the pattern of action is being intensified will be a considerable challenge, one with implications for your own mode of functioning—but more especially for that of Auxiliary Board members. Clusters that are in the front ranks of the growth process in their areas will inevitably claim a large share of their time; also, administrative arrangements at the regional level will more frequently require their support. They are concerned with much of what occurs in the community; attentive both to the development of each stage of the educational process and to the strengthening of the cycles of activity, they promote coherence among the lines of action being advanced in a cluster and fan into flame a passion for teaching. In the exercise of their responsibility to foster learning and to help the friends enter the arena of service, they draw heavily on the training institute, aspects of whose work align closely with theirs. But their other duties are equally demanding. As such, they will need to consider how, in order to fulfil those wide-ranging responsibilities, they can draw on the help of their assistants more extensively and more creatively. Assistants, of course, may be assigned any task—simple or complex, general or highly specific—and this versatility constitutes a distinctive strength. While some assistants might be occupied with the development of a local community, others might be given tasks that relate to an entire cluster. By properly orienting them, guiding them as capacity expands, and gradually increasing their duties, Auxiliary Board members will be able to better exploit the possibilities that exist. Much is sure to be learned as a result, and you are encouraged to derive insights from the experience of your auxiliaries.

A period of special potency

The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly

fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. By convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* is evoked in any locality. The enhancement of the devotional character of a community also has an effect on the Nineteen Day Feast and can be felt at other times when the friends come together.

Holy Day commemorations hold a special position in this regard. The Tablets recited, and the prayers, stories, songs, and sentiments voiced—all of them expressions of love for those sacred Figures Whose lives and missions are being remembered—stir the heart and fill the soul with awe and wonder. During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá’ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation, a Manifestation of God, was born to the world. Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá’í identity.

Over the coming years, the community will, in fact, encounter a series of anniversaries, concluding with the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in November 2021, which will close the first century of the Formative Age. Next year the Bahá’í world will mark one hundred years since the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan flowed from the pen of the Master. In these fourteen Tablets, revealed during one of humanity’s darkest hours, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching work that defined its theatre of action as the entire planet. Held in abeyance until 1937, when the first in a succession of Plans launched at the instigation of the Guardian was assigned to the Bahá’ís of North America, the Divine Plan has continued to unfold over the decades since as the collective capacity of Bahá’u’lláh’s followers has grown, enabling them to take on ever-greater challenges. How wondrous the vision of the Plan’s Author! Placing before the friends the prospect of a day when the light of His Father’s Revelation would illuminate every corner of the world, He set out not only strategies for achieving this feat but guiding principles and unchanging spiritual requisites. Every effort made by the friends to systematically propagate the divine teachings traces its origins to the forces set in motion in the Divine Plan.

The coming global endeavour to which the friends will be summoned calls for the application of proven strategies, systematic action, informed analysis, and keen insight. Yet above all, it is a spiritual enterprise, and its true character should never be obscured. The urgency to act is impelled by the world’s desperate condition. All that the followers of Bahá’u’lláh have learned in the last twenty years must culminate in the accomplishments of the next five. The scale of what is being asked of them brings to mind one of His Tablets in which He describes, in striking terms, the challenge entailed in spreading His Cause:

How many the lands that remained untilled and uncultivated; and how many the lands that were tilled and cultivated, and yet remained without water; and how many the lands which, when the harvest time arrived, no harvester came forth to reap! However, through the wonders of God’s favour and the revelations of His loving-kindness, We cherish the hope that souls may appear who are the

embodiments of heavenly virtue and who will occupy themselves with teaching the Cause of God and training all that dwell on earth.

The systematic efforts of His loved ones throughout the world aim at the fulfilment of the hope thus expressed by the Blessed Perfection. May He Himself reinforce them at every turn.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

2 January 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We address you these words from the gathering where, for five successive days, the Continental Counsellors have earnestly considered the implications of the next global Plan. Their insightful consultations drew on the impressive body of knowledge about the process of capacity building that is being generated in thousands of clusters worldwide. The numerous accounts that were shared in the course of the Conference attested the creativity, tenacity, and burgeoning abilities of the community of the Greatest Name and, above all, its reliance on the confirmations of the Almighty. There is a growing appreciation among people in all parts of the world of the efficacy of Bahá'u'lláh's remedy for healing the maladies of society.

Before the first century of the Formative Age concludes, there lies a span of time that stretches between two anniversaries associated with documents of measureless significance. It begins with the centenary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, just as the friends are embarking on a new stage in the unfoldment of that Plan. It ends at the lapse of one hundred years since the Ascension of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which was followed by the opening of the Master's Will and Testament. With these thoughts in mind, and in preparation for their deliberations, the Continental Counsellors, led by the members of the Universal House of Justice and the International Teaching Centre, visited the House of the Master—the place where three of the Tablets of the Divine Plan had been revealed and where, a few weeks after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, His Will and Testament had been read aloud to believers from four continents. In that sacred House, on the eve of the present Conference, passages were recited from those two Charters which, Shoghi Effendi explained, set in motion processes for the propagation of the Faith and the establishment of its Administrative Order. This was a fitting prologue to five days of consultation focused on diffusing more widely the light of Bahá'u'lláh and strengthening the ability of His institutions to act as channels through which His promised blessings may flow to humankind.

The provisions of the coming Five Year Plan are contained in the message that we addressed to the Conference on its opening day and which was at the same time distributed to all National Spiritual Assemblies. The colossal effort that will be asked from the loved ones of the Lord was clearly recognized by the Counsellors, but they also voiced their confidence in the capacity of the Bahá'í world to face this challenge. At no earlier time could such an undertaking have been seriously contemplated, but given what is being achieved in the present Plan, the realms of possibility are wider than ever before. Our hearts were moved by the reports that began to arrive, within hours of our message to the Conference being released, of the friends eagerly coming together in settings of all kinds to help one another become familiar with its contents. We hope that study of the message will spread rapidly throughout the community. Meanwhile, the institutions will be putting in place whatever administrative and organizational arrangements are necessary to ensure the most auspicious start to the Plan at Ridván.

In the few months that remain before then, the work of the current Plan, establishing new programmes of growth in particular, will continue to be pursued. Every step taken in that direction will increase the

readiness of the worldwide community to begin the next five-year enterprise. Each moment is precious. We long to see every believer choose the path of consecrated service and high endeavour to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly summoned the friends in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. In our supplications on your behalf, we will beseech the Author of that Plan to intercede before the throne of His Father that He might guide you in your service as long as there are souls in need of the bread of heaven.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

26 March 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the World acting under the Mandate of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

Dearly loved Friends,

Today at dawn, on your behalf, the members of the Universal House of Justice gathered with the members of the International Teaching Centre in the Master's room at the house in Bahjí to commemorate that pivotal moment when the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Prayers from those wondrous Tablets were offered in thanksgiving for the glorious achievements of the past. Divine assistance was sought in support of the labours required in the forthcoming stage of the Plan's unfoldment. And heavenly bounties were implored to ensure still greater victories in meeting the challenges of future stages, one after another, reaching as far as the fringes of the Golden Age.

The Divine Plan, that sublime series of letters addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Bahá'ís of North America between 26 March 1916 and 8 March 1917, constitutes one of the mighty Charters of His Father's Faith. Set forth in those fourteen Tablets, Shoghi Effendi explains, is "the mightiest Plan ever generated through the creative power of the Most Great Name." It is "impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise" and "claims as the theatre for its operation territories spread over five continents and the islands of the seven seas." Within it are held "the seeds of the world's spiritual revival and ultimate redemption."

In the Tablets of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only provided the broad vision necessary to carry out the responsibilities entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to His loved ones, but He also outlined spiritual concepts and practical strategies necessary for success. In His exhortations to teach and to travel to teach; to arise personally or deputize others; to move to all parts of the world and open countries and territories, each meticulously named; to learn the relevant languages and translate and disseminate the Sacred Texts; to train the teachers of the Faith and especially youth; to teach the masses and, particularly, indigenous peoples; to be firm in the Covenant and protect the Faith; and to sow seeds and cultivate them in a process of organic growth, we find hallmarks of the entire series of Plans—each a specific stage of the Divine Plan shaped by the Head of the Faith—that will continue to unfold throughout the Formative Age.

The initial response to the Tablets of the Divine Plan was limited to the noble exploits of a few who, like the immortal Martha Root, arose independently. It was Shoghi Effendi who assisted the Bahá'ís of the world to gradually grasp the significance of this Charter and learn to approach its requirements in a systematic manner. The Plan was held in abeyance for nearly twenty years while the Administrative Order took shape, after which communities were patiently guided to conduct national plans, including the two Seven Year Plans in North America that constituted the first stages of the Divine Plan, until finally, in 1953, all could unite in the first global Plan, the Ten Year Crusade. Shoghi Effendi looked beyond that crucial decade to "the launching of world-wide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in future epochs" of the Formative Age, "by the Universal House of Justice, that will symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies." The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace

thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet. Let every Bahá'í appreciate, more deeply than ever before, that the provisions of the next stage of the Divine Plan set forth in our recent message to the Counsellors' Conference comprise the challenging requirements of the present hour—requirements both urgent and sacred, which, when sacrificially and persistently addressed, may hasten “the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace and the unfoldment of that world civilization which is the offspring and primary purpose of that Peace.”

How is it possible to adequately convey our feelings of irrepressible love and unbounded admiration as we reflect on the exploits of the members of your communities, past and present, in pursuit of your sacred mission? The vision that unfolds before our eyes is of a grassroots stirring, an organic flowering, a resistless movement that has grown imperceptibly at times and at others in great surges to eventually embrace the entire world: God-intoxicated lovers exceeding their personal capacities, embryonic institutions learning to exercise their powers for the well-being of humanity, communities emerging as shelters and schools in which human potential is nourished. We pay homage to the humblest ministrations and ceaseless endeavours of the Faith's devoted rank and file, as well as to the extraordinary accomplishments of its heroes, knights, and martyrs. On vast continents and scattered islands, from arctic regions to desert climes, atop mountain plateaus and across lowland plains, in crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths, you and your spiritual forebears brought the message of the Blessed Beauty to peoples and nations. You sacrificed rest and comfort and left your homes to journey to unfamiliar lands or homefront outposts. You set aside your own interests for the common good. Whatever your means, you sacrificially contributed your share of resources. You taught the Faith to multitudes, to groups in various settings, and to individuals in your homes. You quickened souls and helped them on their own paths of service, disseminated widely the Bahá'í writings and participated in deep study of the teachings, strove for excellence in all fields, engaged diverse peoples of all strata in conversations pertaining to the search for solutions to humanity's ills, and initiated efforts for economic and social development. Though misunderstandings and problems sometimes arose, you forgave one another and marched together in serried lines. You raised the framework of the Administrative Order and clung steadfastly to the Covenant, protecting the Faith from every blow directed against it. In your ardour for the Beloved, you endured prejudice and estrangement, privation and loneliness, persecution and imprisonment. You welcomed and nurtured generations of children and youth upon whom the vitality of the Faith and future of humanity depend, and as tested veterans, you heeded the Master's admonition to serve until your last breath. You have written the story of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan on the scroll of its first century. Before you, beloved friends, lies stretched out the blank scroll of the future on which you and your spiritual descendants will inscribe fresh and lasting deeds of renunciation and heroism for the betterment of the world.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

26 March 2016

To the chosen recipients of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Bahá’ís of the United States and the Bahá’ís of Canada

Dearly loved Friends,

We cannot allow this historic moment to pass without adding—to our message to the believers worldwide—a word to those whom the Author of the Divine Plan singled out for a sacred responsibility and whose triumphs and travails shaped much of the past century in accordance with His high expectations.

Soon after the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá determined that one of the principal objectives of His ministry would be to establish a community in North America under the banner of His Father’s Cause. He dispatched teachers, illumined pilgrims, embarked upon an unparalleled visit in His declining years, laid the cornerstone of your House of Worship, carved in fourteen Tablets addressed to you a divine mission, and “out of the abundance of His heart chose to bestow on His favored disciples, to the very last day of His life, the tokens of His unfailing solicitude.” Later, at a time when the believers in the Cradle of the Faith were hamstrung by persecution, when the light of the Faith in Europe was eclipsed by the growing spectre of another war, when the most vibrant center in central Asia was dismantled, and even the world center of the Faith itself was disrupted by a conflagration in the Holy Land, the “one chief remaining citadel,” the “mighty arm” that still raised aloft “the standard of an unconquerable Faith,” was, Shoghi Effendi observed, “none other than the blessed community of the followers of the Most Great Name in the North American continent.” He placed you—the Plan’s chief executors and its co-executors—among the vanguard of Bahá’u’lláh’s resistless legions.

It is impossible here to recount the range of your illustrious achievements during the past century. You have already accomplished that which is worthy of the gratitude and admiration of the entire Bahá’í world, but your mission is far from complete. After a century of resolute action, you should, more than ever before, be able to discern the straight path traced by heavenly inspiration across the many stages of the Divine Plan since its systematic execution began in 1937, and thus grasp the full implications of the latest stage about to open. The tasks confronting you are not identical with those of an earlier age. With the international spread of the Faith largely concluded, demands on you are now most pressing on the homefront. The process of entry by troops that emerged so tenuously in the Ten Year Crusade, and was fostered in the decades that followed, is now being extended through a sound process of community building in center after center in all those countries and territories that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá marked out so long ago. Your sister communities, so many of which you helped to establish, are now mature, and you stand with them ready to take on the sterner challenges that lie ahead. The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.

This is a time for jubilation. Take pride in the sacrifices and victories of so many devoted souls who arose in response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's call. With the same spirit of renunciation shown by your predecessors, cast away the idle fancies and distractions of a world that has lost its way that you may consecrate yourselves in the next five years to the priceless opportunities and inescapable obligations of the latest stage of a spiritual enterprise on which the fate of humanity ultimately depends.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Ridván 2016

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With the advent of the King of Festivals, the period of preparation for the next global Plan is over: we now summon the friends of God to a new five-year commitment of courage, resolve, and resources.

The company of Bahá'u'lláh's faithful stands poised. Institutional gatherings convened across the world in recent months have sent out successive signals of eagerness to begin this mighty enterprise. The imperatives contained in the message addressed to the Counsellors' Conference are already being translated into decisive plans of action. Decades of heroic endeavour have shaped the community and earned it a measure of proven ability in fostering growth, steeling it for this moment. The last two decades, in particular, have markedly accelerated this longed-for rise in proficiency.

During this period, the adoption of an evolving framework for action has enabled the friends to progressively nurture and refine essential capacities, giving rise to simple acts of service at first, leading to more elaborate patterns of action, which in turn demanded the development of capacities still more complex. In this way, a systematic process of human resource development and community building has been started in thousands of clusters—and, in many of them, become far advanced. The focus has not been solely on the individual believer, or the community, or the institutions of the Faith; all three inseparable participants in the evolution of the new World Order are being stimulated by the spiritual forces released through the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. The signs of their progress are more and more apparent: in the confidence that countless believers have acquired to share accounts of Bahá'u'lláh's life and discuss the implications of His Revelation and peerless Covenant; in the growing contingents of souls who, as a result, have been attracted to His Cause and are contributing to the achievement of His unifying vision; in the ability of Bahá'ís and their friends, at the very grassroots of the community, to describe in eloquent terms their experience of a process capable of transforming character and shaping social existence; in the significantly larger numbers of those indigenous to a country who, as members of Bahá'í institutions and agencies, are now guiding the affairs of their communities; in the reliable, generous, and sacrificial giving to the Fund, so vital for sustaining the advancement of the Faith; in the unprecedented efflorescence of individual initiative and collective action in support of community-building activities; in the enthusiasm of so many selfless souls in the prime of youth who are bringing immense vigour to this work, notably by tending to the spiritual education of younger generations; in the enhancement of the devotional character of the community through regular gatherings for worship; in the rise in capacity at all levels of Bahá'í administration; in the readiness of institutions, agencies, and individuals to think in terms of process, to read their immediate reality and assess their resources in the places where they live, and to make plans on that basis; in the now familiar dynamic of study, consultation, action, and reflection that has cultivated an instinctive posture of learning; in the mounting appreciation for what it means to give effect to the Teachings through social action; in the multiplying opportunities being sought and seized to offer a Bahá'í perspective on discourses prevalent in society; in the awareness of a global community that, in

all its endeavours, it is hastening the emergence of divine civilization by manifesting the society-building power inherent in the Cause; indeed, in the friends' growing consciousness that their efforts to foster inner transformation, to widen the circle of unity, to collaborate with others in the field of service, to help populations take charge of their own spiritual, social, and economic development—and, through all such efforts, to bring about the betterment of the world—express the very purpose of religion itself.

While no single measure can capture the totality of the Bahá'í community's progress, much can be inferred from the number of clusters worldwide where a programme of growth has been established, which, with gratitude for the bounties bestowed by the Abhá Beauty, we confirm has surpassed 5,000. So broad a foundation as this was a prerequisite for taking on the task that now confronts the Bahá'í world—strengthening the process of growth in every cluster where it has begun and extending further an enriching pattern of community life. The sustained effort required will be arduous. But the outcome has the potential to be profoundly significant, even epoch making. Small steps, if they are regular and rapid, add up to a great distance travelled. By concentrating on the advance that must be made in a cluster in an initial period—for instance, in the six cycles occurring before the first of the bicentennial anniversaries—the friends will do much to bring their goal for the full five years within reach. In each cycle are vested fleeting opportunities for a stride forward, precious possibilities that will not return.

In society at large, alas, the symptoms of an ever-deepening malaise of the soul multiply and worsen. How striking that, as the peoples of the world suffer for want of the true remedy and turn fitfully from one false hope to another, you are collectedly refining an instrument that connects hearts with the Word of God eternal. How striking that, amid the cacophony of fixed opinions and opposing interests that grows everywhere more fierce, you are focused on drawing people together to build communities that are havens of unity. Far from disheartening you, let the world's prejudices and hostilities be reminders of how urgently souls all around you need the healing balm that you alone can present to them.

This is the last in a series of consecutive Five Year Plans. At its close, a new phase in the evolution of the Divine Plan will open, set to propel the community of Bahá'u'lláh towards the third century of the Bahá'í Era. May the friends of God in every country appreciate the promise of these few years ahead, which will be rigorous preparation for the even mightier tasks yet to come. The present Plan's broad scope enables every individual to support this work, however humble one's share. We ask you, cherished co-workers, adorers of Him Who is the Best-Beloved of the worlds, to spare no effort in applying all you have learned and every God-given ability and skill you possess to advance the Divine Plan into its next essential stage. To your own ardent supplications for heavenly assistance we add ours, offered in the Holy Shrines, on behalf of all who labour for this all-encompassing Cause.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

PART II

Extracts from Letters Written on Behalf of the Universal House of Justice

11 August 2008

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

... The Bahá'í world is engaged in a collective enterprise in which new approaches and a capacity for learning have greatly contributed to its expansion and consolidation. The friends should welcome these developments, while understanding that new approaches invariably bring with them challenges as well as new opportunities. The guidance of the House of Justice and the learning derived from experience will gradually resolve the challenges and any misunderstandings that arise as the process unfolds. Each believer can find an active role to play in advancing the program of growth in a cluster, while contributing to unity and to the cultivation of an attitude of learning. As time passes, and the capacity and understanding of the believers in a cluster grow, the activities of the Plan will result not only in quantitative growth but also in an improvement in the quality of Bahá'í community life.

As to the role of Local Spiritual Assemblies, you may be aware that many Assemblies are already making a great contribution to the progress of their clusters in the United States.

This matter has been addressed in some detail by both your National Spiritual Assembly and Regional Bahá'í Council, and you may wish to contact them for additional information. It is true that the nature of the planning process in a cluster, even in those clusters that fall entirely under the jurisdiction of a single Assembly, has changed somewhat from the procedures followed in the past. Yet, it should be evident that the objective of the planning process, which is to mobilize an ever-greater number of individual believers to actively participate in the systematic prosecution of the teaching work, has been quite successful. Members of Assemblies should therefore be patient and approach these new challenges with an open heart and mind and with a willingness to look beyond the transitory mistakes that may be made. Assemblies still shoulder a wide range of responsibilities beyond those that pertain to the teaching work, and as the number of believers in a cluster increases, additional responsibilities, including those deriving from a greater involvement in the life of society, will emerge. . . .

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

30 September 2008

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

... You ask whether the current focus on the core activities implies that other activities that have been pursued in the past, such as firesides, deepenings, proclamation activities, and travel teaching, are to be abandoned, and you question whether visiting believers and maintaining Assemblies in remote places are still important. You also express concern over what you perceive to be a shift in the locus of decision making away from elected bodies to appointed institutions, which has given you the impression “that believers at the grass roots are no longer being asked what they think, but are more or less being told what they should think.”

As you know, during the time of the Guardian, emphasis was placed on establishing the Faith throughout the world and in raising up the administrative institutions that would provide the foundation for the prosecution of the Divine Plan. As the House of Justice observed in its Ricjvan 2000 message, this task has been essentially completed. The Cause has now entered a stage in its organic development in which it is necessary to prepare the community for entry by troops and, beyond that, mass conversion. The current series of global teaching Plans have focused the energies of the Bahá'ís on stimulating the processes of growth and community development at the level of the cluster, and the friends have been encouraged to teach the Faith where they live. Those clusters with larger Bahá'í populations have been selected for close attention with the expectation that they can more rapidly advance, and the lessons learned can then be applied to other clusters. This does not mean that believers from clusters with smaller Bahá'í populations are to be neglected or that they need to wait in order to initiate their own programs of growth. On the contrary, they should vigorously engage themselves in the development of the core activities, enthusiastically pursuing every avenue available to involve an ever-increasing number of non-Bahá'ís in their activities.

The emphasis on the two essential movements of the Plan- the development of human resources through participation in the courses of the training institute and the progression of clusters through a series of developmental stages that result in the initiation of programs of intensive growth-does not require that activities that have been pursued in the past be suspended. Rather, what it calls for is that those activities be assessed in the context of the needs, resources, and priorities of a cluster and that thoughtful decisions be made in the light of experience, with consideration being given to the most effective use of the resources available and the value of systematization. While the House of Justice has emphasized that it is important for the friends to maintain focus on the essential activities of the Plan, it clarified in its message of 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors that “to maintain focus does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others. Clearly, there are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed.” The maintenance of Assemblies in remote areas constitutes one such special need that is not to be neglected. Yet here, too, the accomplishment of this objective would be greatly facilitated by

employing the instruments of the current Plan, which have proven so effective in fostering the growth and development of the community.

Essential aspects of advancing the process of entry by troops are the strengthening and development of the three protagonists of the Plans-the individual believer, the institutions, and the local community-and the development of a culture of learning. Mistakes will be made as the friends adjust to the new requirements. But the House of Justice is confident that as experience and the capacity for learning increase, a greater measure of coherence among activities related to the expansion and consolidation of the Cause will be achieved, the complementary nature of the roles of the institutions of the Faith will be more clearly understood and the collaboration that is to take place among them will become more effective. It is important to keep in mind that we are in the early stages of a vast evolutionary process of development that will, in time, lead to a transformation in all aspects of the life of the Bahá'í community and the functioning of its institutions . . .

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

23 December 2008

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

Your email letter dated 26 June 2008, in which you inquire about the extent to which a Bahá'í, particularly one who is a social scientist or academic, may speak publicly on sociopolitical issues, has been received by the Universal House of Justice. We have been asked to convey the following reply.

You are, of course, well aware of the principle of non-involvement in politics enunciated by Shoghi Effendi. Bahá'ís are to “refrain from associating themselves, whether by word or by deed, with the political pursuits of their respective nations, with the policies of their governments and the schemes and programs of parties and factions.” They “assign no blame, take no side, further no design, and identify themselves with no system prejudicial to the best interests” of the Faith and eschew “the entanglements and bickerings inseparable from the pursuits of the politician.” They are to “rise above all particularism and partisanship, above the vain disputes, the petty calculations, the transient passions that agitate the face, and engage the attention, of a changing world.” This principle, which demands strict avoidance of any type of partisan political activity, must be scrupulously upheld. However, as society and its political processes evolve and as the Faith grows, the interaction between the two becomes increasingly complex. The House of Justice will provide the necessary guidance over time to apply this principle to existing circumstances.

The term “politics” can have a broad meaning, and therefore it is important to distinguish between partisan political activity and the discourse and action intended to bring about constructive social change. While the former is proscribed, the latter is enjoined; indeed, a central purpose of the Bahá'í community is social transformation. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization* amply demonstrates the Faith’s commitment to promoting social change without entering into the arena of partisan politics. So too, innumerable passages in the Bahá'í Writings encourage the believers to contribute to the betterment of the world. “Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,” Baha’u’llah states, “and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá urges the friends to “become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world—for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace.” Further, in a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi explains that “much as the friends must guard against in any way seeming to identify themselves or the Cause with any political party, they must also guard against the other extreme of never taking part, with other progressive groups, in conferences or committees designed to promote some activity in entire accord with our teachings.” In another letter written on his behalf in 1948, when racial inequality was enshrined in the laws of many states in the United States, he indicates that there is “no objection at all to the students taking part in something so obviously akin to the spirit of our teachings as a campus demonstration against race prejudice.” Bahá'ís must, therefore, be tireless in addressing, through word and deed, a range of social issues.

When the Bahá'í community was small, its contribution to social well-being was naturally limited. In 1983 the House of Justice announced that the growth of the Faith had given rise to the need for a greater involvement in the life of society. Bahá'ís began to engage more systematically in the work of social and economic development through activities of varying degrees of complexity. Efforts to contribute to social transformation also include participation in the public discourse on issues of concern to humanity, such as peace, the elimination of prejudices of all kinds, the spiritual and moral empowerment of youth, and the promotion of justice. These two types of activity have steadily increased over the past twenty-five years and will grow in scope and influence in the future.

The organized endeavors of the Bahá'í community in these areas are reinforced by the diverse initiatives of individual believers working in various fields—as volunteers, professionals, and experts—to contribute to social change. The distinctive nature of their approach is to avoid conflict and the contest for power while striving to unite people in the search for underlying moral and spiritual principles and for practical measures that can lead to the just resolution of the problems afflicting society. Bahá'ís perceive humanity as a single body. All are inseparably bound to one another. A social order structured to meet the needs of one group at the expense of another results in injustice and oppression. Instead, the best interest of each component part is achieved by considering its needs in the context of the well-being of the whole.

Involvement in social discourse and action will at times require that Bahá'ís become associated with the development of public policy. In this regard, the term “policy,” like the term “politics,” has a broad meaning. While refraining from discussion of policies pertaining to political relations between nations or partisan political affairs within a country, Bahá'ís will no doubt contribute to the formulation and implementation of policies that address certain social concerns. Examples of such concerns are safeguarding the rights of women, extending effective education to all children, curbing the spread of infectious disease, protecting the environment, and eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty.

It is evident, then, that as a Bahá'í who is a political scientist you have a great deal of latitude to comment on social issues. Yet it is also possible to participate in the generation and application of knowledge in your field by dealing with topics that are more directly political in nature. You are no doubt aware of the general advice, written on behalf of the Guardian, that one way to criticize the social and political order of the day without siding with or opposing an existing regime is to offer a deeper analysis on the level of political theory rather than practical politics. Another approach would be to contribute to scientific inquiry and shed light on differing viewpoints to seek common understanding and effective solutions without succumbing to partisan advocacy and obfuscation. Baha'u'llah states that “every matter related to state affairs which ye raise for discussion falls under the shadow of one of the words sent down from the heaven of His glorious and exalted utterance.” You have the opportunity to mine the gems of His Revelation and to prepare and present them in a manner that is attractive to those seeking new insights. You will have to learn over time how to find a balance between the principles and concepts you hold as true that come from the Teachings of the Faith and from your discipline.

Challenges will inevitably arise. For example, you may find that an issue pertaining to social action has been co-opted by the political debate among competing factions, and wisdom will be required to determine whether to adjust your approach or let the matter rest for a time. In some cases it may be necessary to forgo opportunities that would thrust you into political debate or criticism of

partisan policies of governments. In other instances there may be special sensitivities, such as topics related to countries where the Bahá'í community faces hardship or oppression, when comments could create the impression that the friends are engaged in political activity against the interests of a particular government. These same considerations arise when evaluating invitations from the media to comment or engage in discussion on the political affairs of the day. Your National Spiritual Assembly is available to assist you in clarifying particular questions should the need arise.

Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that your efforts to reflect the principles of the Faith in your professional activities may attract the blessings and confirmations of the Ancient Beauty.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

4 January 2009

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Australia

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Your email letter dated 23 July 2008 has been received by the Universal House of Justice, which is heartened to see that you are engaged in such focused consultations on how best to develop the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. You have raised a number of pertinent questions in this respect, especially related to the Centre's programs of study. While such specifics deserve ample attention, the House of Justice feels it would be timely for you to step back at this important juncture in the development of your community and survey from a broad perspective its challenges and possibilities. In this connection, we have been asked to write to you as follows.

With the institute process so well advanced and the core activities flourishing in cluster after cluster, a systematic pattern of action has taken root in your community, and you can have every confidence that provisions are now in place to ensure Baha'u'llah's Message reaches increasing numbers of people of all ages and backgrounds in your country. It will be essential, of course, for momentum to be maintained—indeed, accelerated. But there is no doubt that the prospects for the growth of the Australian Bahá'í community are bright.

Like so many communities worldwide, then, yours will find itself being drawn further and further into the life of society in the years ahead as a natural consequence of its continued expansion and consolidation. The greater the clarity of thought you maintain about the nature of this challenge, already showing signs of the pressing demands it brings, the more effective will be the response of your community in meeting it. At this stage in your development, the House of Justice encourages you to begin to examine the work of your community in terms of three broad areas of action, which, though distinct from one another, each with its own methods and instruments, must achieve a high degree of coherence between them, if they are to reinforce one another and lend substantial impetus to the movement of the Australian people towards the spiritually and materially prosperous civilization envisioned in the Writings of the Faith. What will ensure this coherence is the process of systematic learning that characterizes them all.

The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community itself can be regarded as one area of action, the approach, methods and instruments of which are now well understood. Social action can be considered another. This term is being employed increasingly in consultations among Bahá'ís, as a result of heightened consciousness and enhanced capacity at the cluster level. It is to be expected that a desire to undertake social action will accompany the collective change which begins to occur in a village or neighborhood as acts of communal worship and home visits are woven together with activities for the spiritual education of its population to create a rich pattern of community life. Social action can, of course, range from the most informal efforts of limited duration to social and economic development programs of a high level of complexity and sophistication promoted by Bahá'í-inspired nongovernmental organizations—all concerned with the application of the teachings to some need identified in such fields as health, education, agriculture and the environment. In this

case, too, there is a vast amount of experience worldwide, fostered and correlated by the Office of Social and Economic Development, that has given rise to effective approaches, which can be exploited at the level of the cluster as soon as the processes of expansion and consolidation have advanced to the degree necessary.

Efforts to participate in the discourses of society constitute a third area of action in which the friends are engaged. Such participation can occur at all levels of society, from the local to the international, through various types of interactions—from informal discussions on Internet forums and attendance at seminars, to the dissemination of statements and contact with government officials. What is important is for Bahá'ís to be present in the many social spaces in which thinking and policies evolve on any one of a number of issues—on governance, the environment, climate change, the equality of men and women, human rights, to mention a few—so that they can, as occasions permit, offer generously, unconditionally and with utmost humility the teachings of the Faith and their experience in applying them as a contribution to the betterment of society. Of course, care should be exercised that the friends involved in this area of activity avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience and drawing attention to fledgling efforts of the Bahá'í community which are best left to come to maturity without interference, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. The development of instruments, methods and approaches for this area of activity is a chief concern of the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, based here at the Bahá'í World Centre.

The House of Justice wishes us to emphasize that the scheme should be regarded as merely one way of conceptualizing the work of the Bahá'í community, one that avoids fragmentation and facilitates sound planning. It does not encompass the entirety of Bahá'í endeavor, the defense work being a case in point. Nor should it assume the status of a definition, as reflected in statements such as “There are three areas of Bahá'í activity.” Further, in no way should the friends feel there is a division of labor, in which one group participates in the work of expansion and consolidation, and another group in each of the other two areas. All Bahá'ís should engage in efforts to expand and consolidate the Faith. They also participate, to some extent, in social action and the discourses of society. In the case of the latter two, however, where the work takes on different degrees of formality, the nature of the tasks to be carried out can become quite complex and sometimes delicate, requiring specialized training and preparation.

Indeed, it is in this context that the Universal House of asks you to consider plans for the development of the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning. As currently conceived, the programs of the Centre are intended to attract students who seek a deeper understanding of various facets of the Faith. However, you are encouraged to detach yourselves from the Centre's past achievements, which have been undeniably praiseworthy, and determine dispassionately what role it would play in the above scheme. At the outset, it should be acknowledged that systematic study of the Faith will be a natural outgrowth of the culture of Bahá'í community life, in which the habit of reading the writings is fostered by the institute process and complemented by local deepening classes, conferences, winter and summer schools, and special gatherings devoted to specific subjects. So, too, will training needed to carry out programs of social and economic development take place at the grass roots of the community. Much learning is still required, however, in developing human resources that can effectively participate in the discourses of society, and it is here that the Yerrinbool Bahá'í Centre of Learning can make a singular contribution.

In that case, the nature of the Centre's programs would change. Still concerned with specialized aspects of the Faith, it would not conduct courses in Bahá'í studies in the same sense as those offered in universities by departments of religious studies, which, as you know, the House of Justice discourages since it could easily lead to a class of individuals in the Bahá'í community who assume a degree of authority on the basis of some formal qualification. Nor would the courses of the Centre simply repeat, in the final analysis, what will already be covered in local deepening classes. They would seek, rather, to relate the teachings of the Faith to a range of social issues, drawing on existing bodies of knowledge in such disciplines as history, economics, philosophy, political science and sociology. Decisions regarding the development of the Centre's facilities and its recognition as a Private Higher Education Provider would need to be taken, then, in this light.

The House of Justice looks forward to learning of the outcome of your consultations on this matter and assures you of its prayers on your behalf.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

15 March 2009

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

...As your experience in the teaching field clearly demonstrates, there are indeed many individuals in your country who are open to the Message of Baha'u'llah and who can be attracted to His Faith. To the earnest teacher, there exists a variety of methods by which such receptive souls can be introduced to the divine principles and, eventually, guided to declare their belief in God's Messenger for this day....

Beyond doubt is the compelling need to ensure that a seeker's faith in the Blessed Beauty, by whatever means it has been awakened, is nursed to maturity. This process of spiritual development entails far more than is suggested by the term deepening; it carries with it an invitation to a higher consciousness of the purpose for which every individual human being was created. It implies a fundamental reorienting of a soul towards its Creator, an awakening to the personal and social implications of the Guardian's statement that Baha'u'llah's Revelation is calling into being "a new race of men," a wholehearted dedication of one's talents and abilities to the attainment of that day when, the Blessed Beauty assures us, "all men shall be regarded as one soul." The efflorescence of those talents and abilities and their channeling into specific acts of service is the goal that distinguishes the training institute process from activities intended to deepen new believers.

The implications at the level of society are no less profound than those at the individual level. "All men," Baha'u'llah asserts, "have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." This, rather than the mere accumulation of religious converts, is the elevated goal towards which all our efforts in the teaching field are directed. The central purpose of the training institute process is to raise up human resources who can contribute to this objective.

In countless instances—including in your own region—participants of the institute process, whether veteran Bahá'ís or those only recently acquainted with the Faith, have testified to the efficacy of the institute courses in opening their eyes to both a new conception of spiritual reality and its implications for the creation of a new civilization, as well as empowering them to become an agent of the renewal society must undergo. The House of Justice is confident that in ... there are innumerable souls who not only have the capacity to embrace this vision, but who are ready, even eager, to work towards its realization.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

17 May 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

In its Riḍván message of 2008, the Universal House of Justice referred to the widening impact of the dynamism flowing from the interactions between the three participants in the Five Year Plan. The celebration of the Nineteen Day Feast has not remained unaffected by this growing dynamism. Everywhere the devotional portion of the Feast is enriched by the sense of reverence cultivated through personal prayer and regular devotional gatherings. The administrative portion is animated by reports on the progress of the Cause, as well as insights contributed by eager believers drawn from diverse populations, both newly enrolled and long-standing, engaged in Bahá'í activity. The social portion transcends polite formalities, becoming the joyous reunion of ardent lovers, of tested companions united in a common purpose, whose conversations are elevated by spiritual themes.

Over the course of the Plan, in response to questions that have been raised about the Nineteen Day Feast, the House of Justice has described how certain fundamental principles are to be applied within the context of a steadily expanding community that is embracing souls from all walks of life, from every background. Since its comments in this respect may well be of interest to all National Spiritual Assemblies, we have been asked to write to you as follows.

Decentralization of the Feast in urban centers

The decentralization of the Nineteen Day Feast in urban centers, where a significant percentage of humanity currently resides, is an inevitable consequence of the growth of the Faith, marking a significant stage in the organic development of a local community. While care should be taken to avoid instituting this practice precipitously when the number of believers in the entire city is relatively small, a Local Spiritual Assembly should not feel obliged to prolong the pattern of hosting a community-wide Feast if it is no longer propitious. Such a change may be required when limited time or facilities hamper the satisfactory observance of the three parts of the Feast in a single location, most notably the portion devoted to consultation on community affairs. Experience to date has demonstrated the salutary effect of decentralizing the Feast on the quality of participation, on bonds of fellowship, and on the overall process of growth. Although some believers may yearn for the enthusiasm generated by large community gatherings, this need can be met on other occasions arranged by the Assembly.

In this connection, we are requested to draw your attention to the 27 December 2005 message of the House of Justice which indicated that, as the process of growth continued to gather momentum worldwide, urban centers would need to be divided into progressively smaller areas, perhaps ultimately into neighborhoods, as a means of facilitating planning and implementation. Not only would such areas become focal points of activity, the message suggested, but in each the Nineteen Day Feast would be conducted. Already in some cities around the world the Feast is held at the intimate level of the neighborhood.

Dividing a local community into areas for the purpose of celebrating the Feast is not without certain challenges. In many cities around the world, for instance, people have been segregated into areas according to various factors such as race, ethnicity, and economic conditions. A Local Assembly must be mindful that barriers entrenched in the wider population are not inadvertently perpetuated in the local Bahá'í community as a whole. By the same token, it must recognize that, for believers newly enrolled in the community, the desire to assume responsibility for the affairs of the Faith is cultivated more readily in gatherings close to home, in a familiar environment.

In deciding to decentralize the Feast, a Local Assembly will need to determine how the devotional portion will be organized and how reports, news, and announcements will be shared. A common set of materials for the administrative part of the Feast would generally be disseminated each Bahá'í month to every area designated to host a gathering, including any particular topics or questions that should be raised. The Assembly will also want to ensure that consultations in each area are fruitful and productive, that the views of the friends are brought to its attention, and that it responds to recommendations in a loving and constructive manner. To this end, it may decide to designate one or more friends to act on its behalf in chairing the gathering, recording the results of consultations, and receiving contributions to the Fund.

Choice of language

As a general principle, the Nineteen Day Feast and other official Bahá'í gatherings should be conducted in the conventional language spoken by the people of the locality. However, as social and economic conditions throughout the world continue to change, it is not unreasonable to assume that more and more people will be forced to migrate to urban centers, forming pockets of minorities, each with a distinct language, as can already be seen, for example, in the concentrations of Spanish-speaking populations in North America or of certain tribal populations in Africa. In such instances, when the Feast is decentralized, the question may well arise as to whether the program can be conducted in the language spoken by the minority population most prevalent in a neighborhood. At this stage, the House of Justice does not wish to lay down any hard and fast rules, and it is left to the discretion of the Local Spiritual Assembly concerned to decide, under the guidance of the National Spiritual Assembly, how to address the matter, approaching it with both flexibility and an attitude of learning.

Naturally, whether the Feast is held centrally or in several locations, a Local Assembly will want all the friends to feel that they are part of one unified community, irrespective of linguistic differences, and will take steps to ensure that an inviting atmosphere is created. To this end, selections from the Writings in the diverse languages spoken by the friends might well be included in the devotional program of the Feast. Further, suitable ways should be found to inform believers not fluent in the language in which the Feast is conducted of the content of major messages and announcements. During consultations, they should be afforded an opportunity to express their views, in their own language if necessary. It should be feasible to offer any translation needed in a manner that does not interfere with the smooth running of the meeting.

Attendance of those who are not Bahá'ís

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Cause, which serves, in part, as a means for the Bahá'í community to address its affairs in a full and frank manner, without fear of creating

misunderstandings among those unfamiliar with its purpose. It is for this reason that participation is limited to members of the Bahá'í community.

In general, the believers are discouraged from inviting those who are not Bahá'ís to the commemoration of the Feast. However, friends of the Faith do sometimes appear unexpectedly, and they are not to be turned away. Courtesy and the spirit of fellowship require that they be warmly received. In this light, unanticipated visitors, who were by and large infrequent in the past, have been welcome to join the devotional and social portions of the Feast, but either they were asked to absent themselves during the administrative portion or that segment of the program would be eliminated entirely.

Now, with the Plan's framework for action well established in so many places, growing numbers enjoy ready access to Bahá'í community life through the core activities, and there is greatly increased likelihood that those who are close to the Faith will learn about the Nineteen Day Feast and appear at its celebration. The House of Justice has decided that, in such instances, rather than eliminating the administrative portion completely or asking the visitors to withdraw, those conducting the program can modify this part of the Feast to accommodate the guests. The sharing of local and national news and information about social events, as well as consultation on topics of general interest, such as the teaching work, service projects, the Fund, and so on, can take place as usual, while discussion of sensitive or problematic issues related to these or other topics can be set aside for another time when the friends can express themselves freely without being inhibited by the presence of visitors.

A similar approach to the administrative portion may be adopted when the Feast is celebrated in the home of a family with some members who are not Bahá'ís. As part of planning these occasions, careful thought must be given, on the one hand, to the requisites of hospitality and love, and, on the other, to those of confidentiality and unfettered discussion on important and sensitive subjects. The Local Assembly, in consultation with the believers who have such relatives, should endeavor to find a satisfactory way to resolve each situation that arises.

Accumulating experience

The continued expansion of the Bahá'í community in the years to come will surely give rise to a range of challenges that will affect how the devotional, administrative, and social aspects of the Nineteen Day Feast are conducted in diverse localities. Responsibility for addressing these challenges will fall, in the first instance, on Local Spiritual Assemblies. Theirs is the duty to remain alert to conditions in their communities, to consult with the friends, to respond thoughtfully to a multiplicity of needs and circumstances, and to remain flexible without compromising fundamental principles. In this connection, they would naturally seek advice from the Auxiliary Board members. National Spiritual Assemblies will, in collaboration with the Counsellors, follow developments closely, familiarize themselves with approaches taken in different localities, facilitate learning to determine which approaches prove most effective over time, and offer guidance and encouragement.

We are to assure you of the supplications of the Universal House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that the Blessed Beauty may confirm your ongoing efforts to guide the friends in discharging their vital responsibilities to promote the Cause of God throughout the world.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

20 November 2009

The Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of Malaysia

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has observed with great interest the strides that your community has made towards achieving the aim of the Five Year Plan. The hearts of your believers are no doubt uplifted by the prospect of launching intensive programs of growth in each and every cluster in mainland Malaysia by the end of the Plan. The progress achieved thus far bears out the remarkable capacities of your community and leaves no doubt that such a marvelous feat is indeed attainable. The acceleration and coherence that your community is beginning to experience in its expansion and consolidation are hard-won accomplishments, and much needs to be done to ensure the sustainability of the gains that are made. In this regard, the role that the Regional Bahá'í Councils play is crucial, and we have been asked to convey to you the following.

A major reorganization of the Regional Bahá'í Councils in mainland Malaysia took place last year when their number was reduced to three, resulting in larger areas of jurisdiction under each. This change provided a greater scope for these institutions to discharge their vital responsibility of overseeing the two essential movements of the Plan. The House of Justice feels that Regional Bahá'í Councils should now be given greater latitude in the discharge of their functions. At the cluster level, the friends are laboring assiduously within the framework of the Plan, laying a firm foundation for the expansion of the Bahá'í community and extending their outreach to their friends, neighbors and colleagues. It is essential that the Regional Councils, together with the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, help agencies at the cluster level meet the administrative challenges of large-scale growth. For example, the Councils will need to assist them in the development of plans; enhance their capacity to collect, maintain and analyze statistical data; provide occasions for consultation and reflection among institutions and agencies; and ensure that the learning gained in one cluster is quickly spread to others. They would also communicate their plans to the friends on a regular basis. Moreover, your National Assembly will need to provide adequate resources, financial and otherwise, to each Regional Council in order for it to carry out its activities and support the work of the agencies serving in the clusters.

Your decision last year to form three institute boards in order to harmonize the institute's operation with that of the Regional Councils was a timely step. This has no doubt affected favorably the institute's endeavors to raise up human resources through a formal program of training, building capacity for service within the Bahá'í community and the larger society. The House of Justice feels that the administration of the training institutes should now be devolved to the Regional Councils. This would include the appointment of the board and the regional coordinator, as well as the approval of the budget for the training institute, which would become part of the regional budget that each Council prepares and administers. In their handling of all matters related to the institute, the Councils would, of course, work closely with the Counsellors.

As the Regional Councils now take on more responsibilities, your Assembly and its agencies will naturally extend to them the necessary support and resources. Your communications in this regard would usually be conveyed formally. At other times, the officers of the National Assembly and other individuals serving at the national office may be in contact with the officers or members of the Regional Councils in a more informal way. In such interactions, it will be important that those at the national level remain mindful of the corporate nature of the Regional Councils and avoid the tendency to issue directives that should more properly come from the Council itself.

It is noted in the minutes of your meeting of 7-9 August 2009 that you plan to give the Regional Councils a role in the development of the National Fund. You are encouraged to move forward in this direction, leading in due course to the establishment of regional branches of the National Fund.

The House of Justice is confident that your exertions, augmented by those of the Continental Counsellors, who will consult and communicate directly and frequently with the Regional Councils, will go a long way towards strengthening these institutions which are to play such a vital role in the progress of the Cause in Malaysia. To this end the House of Justice will offer prayers in the Holy Shrines.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

28 February 2010

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of Papua New Guinea

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has received your letter dated 12 November 2009 in which you seek guidance regarding the means for ensuring, as a National Spiritual Assembly, that coherence is maintained between the process of social and economic development and those of expansion and consolidation in your country. You indicate that this question has occupied your attention for some time now as the number of Bahá'í-inspired social and economic development initiatives in Papua New Guinea has increased. We are requested to write to you as follows and regret the long delay in doing so.

The Universal House of Justice is heartened to note the progress that has been made towards the goal of establishing at least 27 intensive programs of growth in your country by the end of the Five Year Plan, which draws rapidly closer. Clearly the attainment of this goal, which will provide a sound foundation for the further expansion and consolidation of the Faith throughout Papua New Guinea in the years immediately ahead, is of paramount importance. As you know, at the heart of the recent series of global Plans lies the question of capacity building, and it is in this light that the promotion of social and economic development can best be considered. Indeed, experience in Papua New Guinea provides useful insights in this respect.

As you are aware from messages of the Universal House of Justice, sustainable progress in the expansion and consolidation of the Faith was achieved in cluster after cluster around the globe as men and women from within the local population- newly enrolled and veteran, young and old-were assisted through the institute process in their efforts to carry forward the work of the Cause themselves. Further, as more and more of the local population joined them, the scope of their efforts widened, and through the agency of the reflection meeting, they were able to lay down plans of action commensurate with their growing collective capacity. In short, they became active participants in the process of spiritual transformation under way in their communities.

If projects designed to meet the material needs of a population are to contribute to its forward movement, and achieve coherence with efforts undertaken to address spiritual requirements, they must adopt similar approaches and methods. While not devoid of the delivery of services at the local level, Bahá'í projects of social and economic development, whether administered by the institutions of the Faith or by a Bahá'í-inspired organization, should be principally concerned with raising the capacity of the local population to make decisions about its own progress and implement them. In this connection, the House of Justice has been pleased to read reports of the effects of the programs offered by the Rays of Light Foundation, which has been closely guided by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre. Evidence of the complementarity between its programs and the work of expansion and consolidation, as currently conceived, is readily apparent.

In your country, as in many others, there are of course development efforts undertaken by government agencies and nongovernmental organizations, often funded by large international donors, that follow

approaches not necessarily consistent with the ideas expressed above. Bahá'ís in different fields of endeavor will often participate, in a professional capacity, in the implementation or administration of such projects, which, in their own way, benefit the population. In doing so, they should take care not to draw the Bahá'í community into their plans or impinge on its limited resources. Even greater caution must be exercised to avoid these tendencies when one or more Bahá'ís receive a grant to carry out a valuable service to the local population, as in the case of the Sirus Naraqí Foundation to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS-this, especially if they associate their efforts with the Faith in the eyes of the public in some way. . . .

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

13 February 2011

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

... The House of Justice is familiar with your views about the “double crusade” enjoined by Shoghi Effendi in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, as enumerated in your most recent letter as well as your letters of 6 November and 3 December 2009. You should rest assured that at every stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, the Center of Authority in the Faith establishes a framework for action to guide the believers in a united effort to apply Baha'u'llah's teachings for the progress of the Bahá'í community and the building of a world civilization. In the current series of Plans, the House of Justice has identified for the Bahá'í community the essential aim of advancing the process of entry by troops and has outlined the activities conducive to that end. The letter dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors sets out the features of the next Five Year Plan. It is hoped that the perspective provided in this letter will make it evident that the entire series of Plans since 1996 have indeed had at their heart the achievement of the double crusade, “first to regenerate the inward life of their own community, and next to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation.” The energetic prosecution of the Plan is, therefore, the surest and most expeditious way to achieve the objectives to which you aspire.

You are free to share with your National Spiritual Assembly any specific suggestions you may feel are conducive to resolving the challenges facing the American Bahá'í community. However, you should not feel that, because particular recommendations are not adopted, the problems you perceive are being ignored. The activities of the current Plans provide new avenues for addressing the various facets of the double crusade. The culture of learning that has emerged in recent years allows the Bahá'í community to address such challenges in a systematic and ongoing manner in the context of the activities in a cluster. The process must inevitably unfold in an organic manner. Initiatives within the Bahá'í community will emerge at the grass roots in clusters where there is intensive activity; approaches that prove to be effective can gradually be shared with other areas.

As new guidance is provided to the Bahá'ís of the world it is important that the friends welcome the challenge of learning to put it into effect without falling prey to an unfortunate duality that pits one position against another. In this particular instance, a perceived dichotomy between resolving racial prejudice and undertaking the activities of the Plan can be transcended through a process of study, consultation, action, and reflection as described by the House of Justice.

Rest assured of the prayers of the House of Justice in the Holy Shrines that Baha'u'llah may continue to shower you with His confirmations and assist you in His service.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

10 April 2011

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice appreciates your thoughtful inquiry concerning the relationship between eliminating racial prejudice and participating in activities of the Five Year Plan, which was presented in your email letter dated 13 October 2009. The delay in responding was unavoidable in order to allow the time necessary for consideration of the issues raised in light of the progress of the Plan. No doubt, you have by now carefully studied the message of the House of Justice dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, which has a direct bearing on many of your questions.

In your letter, you observe that the many activities carried out in the past by the American Bahá'í community to address racial concerns, despite their obvious merit and the results achieved to date, have been limited in their effect and have not been systematic in nature. Your review of such efforts suggests a cyclical pattern, with fits and starts, in which a certain course of action is presented with fanfare by the institutions, many believers take part although others remain on the sidelines, activities reach a peak, and then, after months or perhaps years, attention wanes, and the community is drawn to other areas until some incident occurs or a new heartfelt appeal is uttered, thus beginning the cycle anew. Simply to repeat the approaches implemented in the past, then, will surely not produce a satisfactory result. The House of Justice notes that the pattern you describe was a characteristic common to many facets of community life, leading it, in 1996, to set the Bahá'í world on a new course. During the Four Year Plan, it wrote:

Our hopes, our goals, our possibilities of moving forward can all be realized through concentrating our endeavors on the major aim of the Divine Plan at its current stage—that is, to effect a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This challenge can be met through persistent effort patiently pursued But also of vital importance to bringing about entry by troops is a realistic approach, systematic action. There are no shortcuts. Systematization ensures consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans. In a general sense, it implies an orderliness of approach in all that pertains to Bahá'í service, whether in teaching or administration, in individual or collective endeavor. While allowing for individual initiative and spontaneity, it suggests the need to be clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious. Systematization is a necessary mode of functioning animated by the urgency to act.

After a decade and a half of systematic effort, a coherent pattern of activity that advances the growth and development of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society has emerged. The current stage of progress and the challenges that lie immediately ahead are summarized in the Ridván 2010 and 28 December 2010 messages. From this perspective, it is possible to see how the challenge of addressing racial prejudice is an integral part of three broad areas of activity in which the Bahá'í world is currently engaged: expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society.

The pattern of spiritual and social life taking shape in clusters that involves study circles, children's classes, junior youth groups, devotional meetings, home visits, teaching efforts, and reflection meetings, as well as Holy Day observances, Nineteen Day Feasts, and other gatherings, provides abundant opportunities for engagement, experience, consultation, and learning that will lead to change in personal and collective understanding and action. Issues of prejudice of race, class, and color will inevitably arise as the friends reach out to diverse populations, especially in the closely knit context of neighborhoods. There, every activity can take a form most suited to the culture and interests of the population, so that new believers can be quickened and confirmed in a nurturing and familiar environment, until they are able to offer their share to the resolution of the challenges faced by a growing Bahá'í community. For this is not a process that some carry out on behalf of others who are passive recipients-the mere extension of a congregation and invitation to paternalism-but one in which an ever-increasing number of souls recognize and take responsibility for the transformation of humanity set in motion by Baha'u'llah. In an environment of love and trust born of common belief, practice, and mission, individuals of different races will have the intimate connection of heart and mind upon which mutual understanding and change depend. As a result of their training and deepening, a growing number of believers will draw insights from the Writings to sensitively and effectively address issues of racial prejudice that arise within their personal lives and families, among community members, and in social settings and the workplace. As programs of growth advance and the scope and intensity of activities grow, the friends will be drawn into participation in conversations and, in time, initiatives for social action at the grass roots where issues pertaining to freedom from prejudice naturally emerge, whether directly or indirectly. And, at the national level, the National Assembly will guide, through its Office of External Affairs, the engagement of the Faith with other agencies and individuals in the discourse pertaining to race unity.

You indicate that some friends wonder whether the Guardian's statement characterizing racial prejudice as "the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution" still applies to the racial situation in the United States, since it was written so long ago. The House of Justice has determined that it is not productive to approach the issue in this manner, as it gives rise to an implicit and false dichotomy that, either what the Guardian said is no longer important, or it is so important that it must be addressed before or apart from all other concerns. Yet, the situation is infinitely more complex. The American nation is much more diverse than in 1938, and the friends cannot be concerned only with relations between black and white, essential as they are. The expressions of racial prejudice have transmuted into forms that are multifaceted, less blatant and more intricate, and thus more intractable. So too, the American Bahá'í community has evolved significantly and is no longer at the same stage of its development; it faces a wider range of challenges but also possesses greater capabilities. The House of Justice stated that the principles Shoghi Effendi brought to the attention of the American believers more than seventy years ago are relevant today, and they will continue to be relevant to future generations. It is obvious, however, that the "long and thorny road, beset with pitfalls" upon which the friends must tread, will take them through an ever-changing landscape that requires that they adapt their approaches to varying circumstances.

In the 28 December message, the House of Justice explained that "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." Even if

such a community were to focus the entirety of its resources on the problem of racial prejudice, even if it were able to heal itself to some extent of that cancerous affliction, in the face of such a monumental social challenge the impact would be inconsequential. Therefore, the friends must effectively assess the forces at work in their society and, beginning in neighborhoods and clusters, contribute their share to the process of learning and systematization which, as their numbers, knowledge, and influence grow, will transform their lives, families, and communities. Only if the efforts to eradicate the bane of prejudice are coherent with the full range of the community's affairs, only if they arise naturally within the systematic pattern of expansion, community building, and involvement with society, will the American believers expand their capacity, year after year and decade after decade, to make their mark on their community and society and contribute to the high aim set for the Bahá'ís by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to eliminate racial prejudice from the face of the earth.

It is the ardent hope of the Universal House of Justice that the believers will appreciate the potentialities that exist within the current pattern of their organic activities for the realization of Baha'u'llah's highest aims for humanity and that they will seize their chance and commit their time, their resources, their energies-indeed their very lives-to these critical efforts for the betterment of the world.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 August 2012

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of the United States

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The establishment of ten Regional Bahá'í Councils in your country is an auspicious moment, occurring at a time when the Bahá'í community of the United States finds itself in a fortified condition, forward-looking and eager to learn from experience. The Universal House of Justice is pleased to observe that the guidance provided in its messages on the Five Year Plan has been, and continues to be, the object of thoughtful study, forming the basis upon which systematic action is being undertaken. It is clear that the friends are acquiring greater familiarity with the dynamics of growth, especially when they see how a fresh sense of community life can emerge, within a neighborhood or town, as the core activities called for by the Plan become deeply rooted.

In each of your regions, encouraging signs appear. A perceived dichotomy that had arisen between classes offered for children living close to one another and centralized schools covering a broader area is yielding to a more mature understanding. Through participation in the courses of the training institute, an ever-greater number of friends are enhancing their capacity to offer spiritual education to those they encounter in the wider society. Classes for the young initiated at the neighborhood level for this purpose are multiplying. In those places where the junior youth spiritual empowerment program has become firmly established, its importance as a vital component of the community-building process is becoming increasingly apparent; it is more promising still that the first two clusters to function as sites for the dissemination of learning about this program have now emerged. The spirit of collaboration among the institutions of the Faith, at every level of the administration, is more and more evident. These are the favorable circumstances in which more than four score believers, eager to stimulate the process of growth across the United States, are assuming their responsibilities as members of the newly reconstituted Regional Bahá'í Councils. They do so knowing that their primary task is to support and guide the work of expansion and consolidation in cluster after cluster. With this in mind, the House of Justice has requested us to convey a number of comments that it is hoped will be of assistance to these devoted friends as they embark on the work before them.

The message of 28 December 2010 from the Universal House of Justice describing the features of the current Five Year Plan makes direct reference to the responsibilities exercised by Regional Councils. The House of Justice highlights, among other things, the need for Councils to pay close attention to the operation of the regional institute, including the scheme of coordination the institute establishes at the level of the cluster. The Councils must ensure, too, the timely appearance and dynamic functioning of Area Teaching Committees. The discharge of these duties, carried out with the assistance of the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, will serve to foster the participation of increasing numbers of the friends in a rising number of programs of growth-and this, in turn, conduces to the sound development of the individual, the community, and the institutions. Overall, a Council would wish to be well informed about the conditions that prevail in each cluster in the region. Further, as you will be aware

from the 12 December 2011 message of the House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies, there are two complementary perspectives from which the Councils will be able to view the pattern of action in a cluster: the “three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows” and the emergence of “an educational process with three distinct stages.”

As they analyze what occurs in a cluster through successive cycles of activity, Regional Councils will benefit from drawing upon the system that has been developed in the Bahá'í world for the generation and dissemination of knowledge about growth; in this connection, the Councils' direct relationship with the Counsellors assumes special significance. Thus will experience gained from the advancement of clusters in your own and other countries provide a store of insight as well as inspiration. Naturally, this knowledge will be derived not only from the successes that accrue, but also from instances where progress in a cluster is impeded. At the same time, a Council will be looking for signs that learning continues to be the mode of operation at the level of the cluster. As one cycle follows after another, there should be a steady rise in the friends' capacity to apply the guidance they have received, to reflect on their own experience in light of what is being learned worldwide, to improve their efforts, and to surmount the obstacles they encounter.

With respect to the educational process whose emergence in clusters is essential to the community-building work everywhere, the 12 December message describes its dynamics in some detail. Although neighborhood classes for the spiritual education of children and the junior youth spiritual empowerment program both took some time to become well established in the United States, there is every sign that they are set to flourish. As indicated above, the prospects for the junior youth program are especially bright. Its impact can be seen in the transformation that occurs within the junior youth who are its participants; they come to regard themselves as agents of social change, each endowed with a twofold sense of purpose that impels them to take charge of their own spiritual and intellectual growth and contribute to the welfare of society. It is noteworthy, however, that the program's beneficial effects are also apparent in the rapid moral and spiritual development of many young people, be they Bahá'ís or not, who are assisted to serve as animators.

Regional Councils, then, should become adept at analyzing the conditions in each cluster from both perspectives set out in the 12 December message. But from either perspective, the critical importance of systematically developing human resources—which lies at the heart of the Plan—must remain in view. For unless a capacity for human resource development is well established in a cluster, there can be no expectation of sustained progress. Conversely, a Bahá'í community that gains solid experience in this work will not only have enhanced its ability to attract growing contingents to the Cause of God; it will also find itself able to rally a perpetually expanding body of individuals dedicated to the transformation of the society around them.

That this process should advance at varying speeds within various populations is to be expected; it is a natural feature of an organic phenomenon. It should certainly not become a cause of anxiety. The Plan's methods and instruments endow the Bahá'í community with the means to labor effectively in every setting—from the university campus to the urban neighborhood, from the rural town to the city suburb. Yet, as you clearly appreciate, to expect the rate at which growth occurs in one instance to be matched in every other, or to curtail the process within one population because others are not equally served, would be wholly unreasonable and ultimately counterproductive. In short, those responsible for coordinating the endeavors of the friends should be ever sensitive to the natural unfoldment of the processes they oversee—conscious of when greater intensity is required in one area and when patience

and encouragement are called for in another. Within each population, the path of learning will thus open up.

Accepting, indeed welcoming, the dynamics that characterize each set of circumstances will help the friends to refrain from drawing unhelpful comparisons between the progress experienced in one area or by one group of believers and that reported elsewhere. The friends will be involved in the work according to their capacities and the possibilities before them. Some will, in the settings where they find themselves, reach out to family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, inviting them to take part in core activities. Others will become integrated into neighborhoods and dedicate themselves to assisting particularly receptive populations to advance along a path of spiritual development-giving rise to centers of intense activity. Of course, where a special measure of receptivity has been recognized, resources will need to be deployed to enable it to blossom. However, the institutions of the Faith need to guard against stifling an instance of rapid growth in a neighborhood by calling on too many individuals from outside to become involved in fledgling efforts.

The House of Justice has previously indicated, in letters written to you on its behalf, the importance of giving due attention to historically significant populations in the United States. This imperative remains. Today, the remarkable phenomenon of immigration that has accelerated in recent decades must also claim a major share of your attention. After all, immigrants whether from the Latin regions of your own continent, across the Pacific from Asia or the Atlantic from Africa-constitute a sizable proportion of the American population. Their sons and daughters now apparently number almost one in four of the children in your country. Among these families whose origins lie beyond your borders a vibrant sense of community is often more pronounced. Raising capacity within these populations to conduct classes for their children, and particularly to implement the program for the spiritual empowerment of their junior youth, will enhance the vitality of community-building endeavors in many clusters.

Intensifying efforts to reach out to a receptive population carries certain implications for the scheme of coordination in a cluster. As indicated in the 12 December message, the International Teaching Centre is following experience around the world to articulate what form the elements of an effective organizational scheme assume under diverse circumstances. In this regard, the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will work closely with the Regional Councils, institute boards, and cluster agencies; your Assembly will, undoubtedly, wish to engage in regular consultation with the Counsellors on this theme to assess the implications of new insights for expansion and consolidation in the United States.

This leads naturally to the consideration of some points that will require the close attention of your Assembly, for the acceleration of the process of growth has profound ramifications for the organization of your National Center. You will recall that a letter to you dated 19 October 2005, written on behalf of the House of Justice, explored in some detail the administrative challenges associated with large-scale expansion. The broad principles elucidated therein continue to apply to your present situation. The letter highlighted the importance of decentralization in order to allow for the necessary flexibility to respond to needs at the grass roots. While many productive steps have been taken, further changes are required to enable you to provide the financial resources necessary to sustain a rising number of programs of growth. Moreover, it seems likely that the same flexibility-and, at times, innovative thinking-will be needed in the approach to the provision of funds to support part- and full-time workers in the regions and clusters. It should be expected that, in the future, increasing responsibility will devolve to these levels. A periodic review of the mandates and the functioning of programs and

offices affiliated with your National Center is necessary to ensure a suitable balance of structures and an appropriate distribution of resources at all levels. Even your internal arrangements for maintaining an open channel of communication between your Assembly and the Regional Councils would benefit from review so that you remain fully informed of advances made in the implementation of the Plan nationwide.

A new chapter in the evolution of the Administrative Order in the United States is now opening, endowed with immense promise. As those dedicated believers called to serve on Regional Councils now take up their responsibilities, no doubt they will be conscious that they function as members of corporate bodies and not, of course, as individual leaders. Indeed, it will be essential for them to remain mindful of the admonitions in the Bahá'í writings that apply to all those charged with the administration of the affairs of the Faith-that they are to approach their work in the spirit of "humble fellowship" and that they must not allow themselves to be considered the "central ornaments of the body of the Cause." So promising a process of growth unfolding in your country at the level of the cluster should not come to revolve around their expectations or to rely on their personal presence. Guarding against the least trace of any such tendency will greatly redound to their effectiveness. For the reality of the situation in many instances is that the richest experience exists at the grass roots, when a nucleus of believers labors intensively to build capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual and social advancement. All those who aim to assist the process of learning at this level must remain sensitive to conditions in individual clusters, lest frequent requests for reports or summons to gatherings-however well intentioned-sap energy or dissipate focus. Rather will they wish to do everything within their means to provide support, to lovingly encourage, to facilitate the efforts under way, and to respond, with flexibility and dispatch, to needs as they arise.

The House of Justice deeply appreciates your earnest exertions to attend to the requirements of the Five Year Plan. It acknowledges receipt of your email letter dated 18 July 2012 enclosing the names of those believers who have the privilege to serve on the Regional Councils in the United States. You are assured that the House of Justice will offer its ardent supplications at the Sacred Threshold on their behalf. May Baha'u'llah continue to bless and confirm the endeavors of the American community in the path of service to His Cause.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

19 April 2013

To three believers

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

... You state that the disparity between the sexual mores of contemporary Western society and the standards of the Bahá'í teachings, which, you indicate, are “in accordance with the moral code of the East,” poses a considerable challenge to the current generation of young believers. In this connection you explain that, since, historically, a great deal of shame was associated with sexuality in European society, and so much energy was directed towards hiding and suppressing it, to abstain from sexual relations before marriage is now negatively viewed as pietism. You add that today marriage is delayed into the thirties after young people have completed their education and saved money for a home, that married life is more complex than in the past since both spouses usually work, and that those who profess ideals of chastity, as in the priesthood, often fall prey to illicit behavior. Further, you suggest that many young Bahá'ís struggle to meet the standard of purity set forth in the teachings and that other young people may be reticent to join the Faith out of a reluctance to uphold it. The House of Justice appreciates the sincerity with which you have expressed your thoughts and acknowledges the very real sense of concern you feel, as the gulf between the principles laid down by Baha'u'llah and the generally accepted practices of society continues to widen.

Young Bahá'ís in Europe face a particular challenge in this respect. Buttressed by its material and intellectual achievements and emboldened by a narrative of accomplishment and superiority that pervades its culture, the West puts itself forward in various ways as a model and measure for others. Yet, reflect upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's trenchant analysis of the limitations of European civilization in His treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Weigh carefully, next, His many exhortations to the individual in that same volume to “become a source of social good” and to “lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race.” Far from allowing themselves to be acculturated to the standards of society, then, Bahá'ís are called upon to be the vanguard and champions of a new civilization. The important issues you raise, therefore, need to be considered not only in the context of the current condition of society but also in light of the nature of Baha'u'llah's laws and teachings and the responsibilities shouldered by every one of His followers, as well as by the community and the institutions of the Faith—this, if the potential to achieve His purpose for humanity is to be realized.

We live in an age when the role of religion in shaping human thought and in guiding individual and collective conduct is increasingly discounted. In societies that have bowed to the dictates of materialism, organized religion is seeing the sphere of its influence contract, becoming confined mostly to the realm of personal experience. Not infrequently the laws of religion are regarded as arbitrary rules blindly obeyed by those incapable of independent thought or as a prudish and outdated code of conduct hypocritically imposed upon others by advocates who, themselves, fail to live up to its demands. Morality is being redefined in such societies, and materialistic assumptions, values, and practices

pertaining to the nature of humankind and its economic and social life are taking on the status of unassailable truth.

Indeed, the expenditure of enormous energy and vast amounts of resources in an attempt to bend truth to conform to personal desire is now a feature of many contemporary societies. The result is a culture that distorts human nature and purpose, trapping human beings in pursuit of idle fancies and vain imaginings and turning them into pliable objects in the hands of the powerful. Yet, the happiness and well-being of humanity depend upon the opposite: cultivating human character and social order in conformity with reality. Divine teachings shed light on reality, enabling every soul to investigate it properly and to acquire, through the exercise of personal discipline, those attributes that are to distinguish the human being. “Man should know his own self,” Baha’u’llah states, “and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty.”

“The object of every Revelation,” Baha’u’llah declares, is “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions.” His appearance signals the emergence of “a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God,” a race that will be purified “from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires” and that will manifest “the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth.” The teachings of Baha’u’llah provide “such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth.” Thus, enshrined in His Revelation is a pattern for future society, radically different from any established in the past, and the promotion of His laws and exhortations constitutes an inseparable part of the effort to lay the foundations of such a society.

It is evident that, if the body and mind are to maintain good health, the laws that govern physical existence cannot be ignored. So, too, for any nation to function properly, there are certain social conventions and laws that, everyone accepts, must be followed. In the same way, there are laws and principles that govern our spiritual lives, and attention to them is of vital importance if the individual and society as a whole are to develop in a sound and harmonious manner. In recognizing the Manifestation of God for today, a believer also acknowledges that His laws and exhortations express truths about the nature of the human being and the purpose of existence; they raise human consciousness, increase understanding, lift the standard of personal conduct, and provide the means for society to progress. His teachings serve, then, to empower humanity; they are the harbinger of human happiness, whose call, far from compelling obedience to an arbitrary and dictatorial regimen of behavior, leads to true freedom. “Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation,” Baha’u’llah states, “they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things.” “Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws,” He declares further, “Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”

Throughout the world, in diverse cultures, Bahá’ís encounter values and practices that stand in sharp contrast to the teachings of the Faith. Some are embedded in social structures, for instance, racial prejudice and gender discrimination, economic exploitation and political corruption. Others pertain to personal conduct, especially with respect to the use of alcohol and drugs, to sexual behavior, and to self-indulgence in general. If Bahá’ís simply surrender to the mores of society, how will conditions change? How will the people of the world distinguish today’s moribund order from the civilization to

which Baha'u'llah is summoning humanity? "Humanity," the Ridván 2012 message of the House of Justice explained, "is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire." "A single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself," the message noted. Young Bahá'ís especially need to take care, lest they imagine they can live according to the norms of contemporary society while adhering to Bahá'í ideals at some minimum level to assuage their conscience or to satisfy the community, for they will soon find themselves consumed in a struggle to obey even the most basic of the Faith's moral teachings and powerless to take up the challenges of their generation. "Wings that are besmirched with mire can never soar," Baha'u'llah warns. The inner joy that every individual seeks, unlike a passing emotion, is not contingent on outside influences; it is a condition, born of certitude and conscious knowledge, fostered by a pure heart, which is able to distinguish between that which has permanence and that which is superficial. "Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven," are Baha'u'llah's words, "yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face."

The duty to obey the laws brought by Baha'u'llah for a new age, then, rests primarily on the individual believer. It lies at the heart of the relationship of the lover and the Beloved; "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty," is Baha'u'llah's exhortation. Yet what is expected in this connection is effort sustained by earnest desire, not instantaneous perfection. The qualities and habits of thought and action that characterize Bahá'í life are developed through daily exertion. "Bring thyself to account each day," writes Baha'u'llah. "Let each morn be better than its eve," He advises, "and each morrow richer than its yesterday." The friends should not lose heart in their personal struggles to attain to the Divine standard, nor be seduced by the argument that, since mistakes will inevitably be made and perfection is impossible, it is futile to exert an effort. They are to steer clear of the pitfalls of hypocrisy, on the one hand—that is, saying one thing yet doing another—and heedlessness, on the other—that is, disregard for the laws, ignoring or explaining away the need to follow them. So too is paralysis engendered by guilt to be avoided; indeed, preoccupation with a particular moral failing can, at times, make it more challenging for it to be overcome.

What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building.

In this context, then, every individual finds himself or herself immersed in a community that serves increasingly as an environment conducive to the cultivation of those attributes that are to distinguish a Bahá'í life—an environment in which a spirit of unity animates one and all; in which the ties of fellowship bind them; in which mistakes are treated with tolerance and fear of failure is diminished; in which criticism of others is avoided and back biting and gossip give way to mutual support and encouragement; in which young and old work shoulder to shoulder, studying the Creative Word together and accompanying one another in their efforts to serve; in which children are reared through

an educational process that strives to sharpen their spiritual faculties and imbue them with the spirit of the Faith; in which young people are helped to detect the false messages spread by society, recognize its fruitless preoccupations, and resist its pressures, directing their energies instead towards its betterment. The institutions of the Faith, for their part, strive to ensure that such an environment is fostered. They do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgmental, eager to punish those who fall short of the Bahá'í standard. Except in extreme cases of blatant and flagrant disregard for the law that could potentially harm the Cause and may require them to administer sanctions, their attention is focused on encouragement, assistance, counsel, and education.

Such an environment creates a very different set of dynamics than the one found particularly in the highly individualistic societies of today. Marriage, for instance, need not be long delayed, as it is in some parts of the world where the maturity and responsibilities of adulthood are deferred in pursuit of the license that a socially prolonged adolescence grants. For the individual, who both contributes to and draws strength from the environment that is the Bahá'í community, adhering to Bahá'í law is endowed with meaning and, though perhaps still difficult on occasion, does not pose the insurmountable challenge that you fear it will. . . .

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

23 April 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of Denmark

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

... The challenge you face in helping the friends in your community to understand the Bahá'í teachings and to apply them in their lives, as the forces of materialism continue to grow in strength, is appreciated by the Universal House of Justice. Enclosed for your reference is a letter recently written on its behalf to three believers in a neighboring country who shared similar concerns about the struggles experienced by young Bahá'í men and women in their efforts to uphold the standards of the Faith, particularly those related to chastity and marriage. It is hoped that the points set out in the letter will assist you in your deliberations on the subject. As the letter makes clear, the issues involved can best be considered in light of the relationships that the Administrative Order seeks to forge among the individual, the institutions, and the community. While responsibility for adhering to the Bahá'í standard rests primarily on the individual believer, it is incumbent upon the institutions of the Faith to support the individual, largely through educational endeavors, and to foster a pattern of community life that is conducive to the spiritual upliftment of its members. It is understood, of course, that in the assumption of these and other sacred duties, Bahá'í institutions may find it necessary at times to take specific action as a means of protecting the community and the integrity of Bahá'í law.

In discharging their educational responsibilities towards the body of the believers, the institutions of the Faith need to bear in mind how little is accomplished when their efforts are reduced to repeated admonitions or to dogmatic instruction in proper conduct. Rather should their aim be to raise consciousness and to increase understanding. Theirs is not the duty to pry into personal lives or to impose Bahá'í law on the individual but to create an environment in which the friends eagerly arise to fulfill their obligations as followers of Baha'u'llah, to uphold His law, and to align their lives with His teachings. The efforts of the institutions will bear fruit to the extent that the friends, especially those of the younger generation, find themselves immersed in the activities of a vibrant and growing community and feel confirmed in the mission with which Baha'u'llah has entrusted them.

One of the most effective instruments at your disposal in this respect is the training institute. It strives to engage the individual in an educational process in which virtuous conduct and self-discipline are developed in the context of service, fostering a coherent and joyful pattern of life that weaves together study, worship, teaching, community building and, in general, involvement in other processes that seek to transform society. At the heart of the educational process is contact with the Word of God, whose power sustains every individual's attempts to purify his or her heart and to walk a path of service with "the feet of detachment." The Guardian encouraged young believers to learn through "active, wholehearted and continued participation" in community activities. Addressed to one young believer, a letter written on his behalf explained: "Bahá'í community life provides you with an indispensable laboratory, where you can translate into living and constructive action the principles which you imbibe

from the Teachings.” “By becoming a real part of that living organism,” the letter went on, “you can catch the real spirit which runs throughout the Bahá’í Teachings.” Such wholehearted participation in the work of the Faith provides an invaluable context for the exertion made by young and old alike to align their lives with Baha’u’llah’s teachings. This is not to say that individuals will not err from time to time, perhaps on occasion in serious ways. Yet, when the desire to uphold the Bahá’í standard is nurtured through service to the common weal in an environment of unfailing love and warm encouragement, the friends will not feel, in the face of such difficulty, that they have no other recourse but to withdraw from community activity out of a sense of shame or, worse, to cover the challenges they are experiencing with the veneer of propriety, living a life in which public words do not conform to private deeds.

Clearly, then, individual moral development needs to be addressed in concert with efforts to enhance the capacities of the community and its institutions. The enclosed letter describes some of the characteristics of the community life that Bahá’ís, guided by the institutions, are striving to create. The environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavoring to achieve the Bahá’í standard in their personal conduct, show patience and respect to each other and, when needed, receive wise counsel and ready assistance. Gossip and backbiting have no place in the Bahá’í community; nor do judgmental attitudes and self-righteousness.

What is essential for every National Assembly to acknowledge in this connection is that, if mutual love and support within the community, important as it is, becomes the only focus, a stagnant environment engendered by an insular mentality will develop. The worldwide Bahá’í community is charged with an historic mission. It must acquire capacity to address increasingly complex spiritual and material requirements as it becomes larger and larger in size. The 28 December 2010 message of the House of Justice indicated: “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.” The current series of global Plans sets out provisions for gradually building individual and collective capacity for the community’s mission. The institutions of a Bahá’í community that has been allowed to become complacent will find it difficult to protect the younger members from the forces of gross materialism, with the accompanying moral decay, that are assailing society. This, then, points to the nature of the capacity-building process in which every Bahá’í institution must energetically engage.

Apart from the measures noted above, which serve to reinforce the integrity of the Bahá’í community, there may be times when specific action is required on the part of the institutions to protect it and to uphold the law. Intervention in any specific case needs, of course, to be carried out with the utmost delicacy and wisdom. Such cases present themselves when the breach of Bahá’í law is public and flagrant, potentially bringing the Faith into disrepute and damaging its good name, or when the individual demonstrates a callous disregard for the teachings and the institutions of the Faith, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the Bahá’í community. In these circumstances, Spiritual Assemblies should follow a middle way: They should not adopt a passive approach, which would be tantamount to condoning behavior contrary to the teachings and which would undermine the imperative to obey Bahá’í law in the eyes of the members of the community. Neither, however, should they act rashly or rigidly to enforce the law, imposing administrative sanctions arbitrarily.

Should the conduct of a believer become so blatant as to attract the attention of the Assembly, it would want, after gaining a relatively clear picture of the issues, to offer loving but firm advice to the friend involved. In most cases it is necessary, in the first instance, to determine to what extent the believer understands the Faith and its standards. Dispassionate counseling, not infrequently over an extended period, to assist the individual concerned in gaining an appreciation of the requirements of Bahá'í law is generally required. So, too, is patience needed, and he or she should be given sufficient time to bring about a change. The Assembly, often aided by the Counsellors or the members of the Auxiliary Boards, may have to help the individual reflect on his or her particular circumstances, apply relevant principles, and explore available options. In deciding on what approach to take, the Assembly should be guided by the understanding that its objective is to assist the friends to draw closer to the Faith while taking care to protect the Bahá'í community from the negative influence of those who have no intention of adhering to its standards. When a believer demonstrates an allegiance to the Cause and a willingness to rectify the situation, continued patience and loving guidance are in order. All throughout, of course, care is taken to ensure that an individual's struggles do not become a source of backbiting or disunity in the community. In this the members of the community need to remember that they should each focus their energies on their own spiritual development and on overcoming their personal shortcomings.

Only in circumstances where a believer, ignoring all admonishments, persists in misconduct and knowingly and consistently violates the law, would it be necessary for the Assembly to consider applying administrative sanctions-this, after warning the individual of the consequences of his or her continued disregard for the teachings. The decision in such matters is left to the National Spiritual Assembly, which is to proceed with the utmost care and circumspection. What is at stake is the participation of the individual in those aspects of community life internal to the body of the followers of Baha'u'llah's teachings, not his or her civil rights. In some cases, partial sanctions may be adequate, allowing the Assembly to deal with a situation in a flexible manner. For example, if the hope is to reawaken in the individual a desire to participate in community life, full sanctions may be counterproductive; an appropriate partial sanction, such as suspending his or her right to be elected to an Assembly, may prove sufficient, for, in any event, it would not be reasonable for a person who flagrantly violates Bahá'í law to be in a position to govern the affairs of the community. Restricting the believer from other forms of service-for instance, acting as a tutor of a study circle or as a children's class teacher-may also be considered. Full removal of administrative rights should be reserved for the most severe and intractable cases, especially when the protection of the community becomes a concern. The wise use of partial sanctions thus provides the Assembly with another means of strengthening the individual and the community. In letters written on behalf of the Guardian advising Assemblies on such matters, he explained that, "although it is sometimes necessary to take away the voting rights of a believer for purposes of discipline," this prerogative of the National Assembly "should be used only in extreme cases." If heavy sanctions are applied to certain acts of immorality, he also observed, "it is only fair to impose equally heavy sanctions on any Bahá'ís who step beyond the moral limits defined by Baha'u'llah," which would obviously, given the circumstances of humanity today, "create an impossible and ridiculous situation."

One final point deserves mention: There may be times when an individual who shows complete indifference to the counsels of the institutions and firm resolution in his or her desire to maintain the status quo has no apparent interest in engaging in the life of the Bahá'í community. In such a case, provided that his or her conduct has no significant bearing on the good name of the Faith, the Assembly may decide to leave the individual to go his or her own way, neither insisting on continued contact nor feeling obliged to impose sanctions. Equally, however, the Assembly need not be anxious

about quickly removing the name of the individual from its rolls, given that circumstances change and a person may, over time, decide to mend his or her ways and return to participate in the life of the community.

In considering matters such as those outlined above, both in handling particular cases and in addressing the broader question of cultivating an attitude of love and respect towards Bahá'í laws and standards, you will no doubt find ongoing consultation with the Counsellors both essential and illuminating.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

23 July 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of India

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has been pleased to note over the past several years that, in cluster after cluster in India, ever-greater numbers of believers and their friends are participating in community-building endeavors as they strive to advance the processes of the Five Year Plan. This, of course, requires that the institutions of the Faith arise with commensurate strength in order to support these activities and ensure that the necessary resources are made available as and when they are needed. One area where institutional capacity will need to be greatly enhanced is the collection and utilization of statistical data, and in this regard, we have been asked to convey the following comments.

As the process of expansion and consolidation progresses within a cluster, the gathering of numerical data is a natural part of the everyday activities that take place as the friends carry out their work and make plans for the next steps they will take. For instance, it is only reasonable to expect that coordinators who accompany children's class teachers would be aware of the number of such classes and the approximate number of children attending each one. So too would be the case with other coordinators of the training institute and the members, especially the secretary, of the Area Teaching Committee. In this connection, instruments such as the Statistical Report Program (SRP) and the Statistical Report Program for the Training Institute (SRP Institute) have proven to be of notable help in maintaining a record of this information. At certain times during the three-month cycle of activity, institutions and agencies serving at the cluster level would pool statistical information, by generating reports from the Statistical Report Program, thus facilitating analysis of the overall progress made and planning for the next cycle of activities. In light of the above, it is apparent that the collection of data is the result of the organic process of growth in each cluster and constitutes only one means, albeit a critical one, for assessing the progress of the Cause and the community-building process under way. Although the data thus collected is used primarily for the benefit of agencies at the cluster level, the Statistical Report Program allows for it to be easily forwarded to the Regional Bahá'í Council and eventually to the National Spiritual Assembly, which may require it for its own analyses.

The Regional Bahá'í Councils play a vital role in facilitating the flow of information by extending the necessary assistance and resources to agencies serving at the cluster level and by raising the capacity of those involved in the collection and utilization of statistical data. Through such endeavors, they will also ensure that their own need for information can be readily met in a timely fashion, without having to issue urgent requests or frequent reminders.

The House of Justice has noted with pleasure the close and increasing collaboration of your Assembly with the Counsellors in several areas that need the attention of both institutions. Paramount among these is helping Regional Councils attain higher levels of functioning in various aspects of their work. You are asked to analyze, together with the Counsellors, what is being learned in the field regarding the flow of information and the efficacy of the systems and mechanisms in place at the regional and cluster

levels and determine what lines of action need to be pursued by each of your institutions. As you are aware, the administrative aides of the Counsellors have been interacting closely with institutions and agencies at the regional and cluster levels with regard to the gathering of information, and they could potentially make an important contribution to the efforts to raise capacity in this area of endeavor.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

24 July 2013

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of Canada

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The Universal House of Justice has recently completed a series of consultations on the intellectual life of the Bahá'í community and its greater involvement in the life of society.

It has asked that we convey to you the following reply, further to your inquiry dated 3 March 2010 regarding the Association for Bahá'í Studies.

Since its establishment in North America in 1975, the Association for Bahá'í Studies has made a valued contribution to the development of the Bahá'í community, and gradually, a network of chapters or related structures devoted to promoting scholarly activity emerged in different parts of the world. Although the approach varied according to resources and circumstances in particular countries, the Associations addressed a range of similar issues. Among these were fostering appreciation for the importance of personal study of the Revelation, correlating the teachings with contemporary thought, defending the Cause, encouraging young believers in their academic pursuits, attracting the interest and involvement of non-Bahá'í academics to the extent possible, and providing a forum for Bahá'í academics to collaborate with one another, thereby helping to raise capacity among those who participate within a wide range of disciplines and, particularly, in specific fields associated more directly with the study of the Faith, such as history, the study of religion, and translation.

In 1996, the Bahá'í world began to focus on a prodigious effort to better understand and systematize its work of expansion and consolidation, of growth and community building. Much has been learned that has profoundly influenced the pattern of activity in which the community is engaged. The Association for Bahá'í Studies, meanwhile, continued to address certain areas that are complementary to the activities unfolding within the recent series of Plans. "There are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed," the House of Justice wrote in a message dated 27 December 2005. It is timely, then, to reflect upon the many years of experience of the Association, the coherence of its undertakings with the major areas of action in which Bahá'ís are engaged, and the possibilities for the most productive avenues of endeavor in the future.

The House of Justice has observed that Bahá'ís will increasingly become involved in the discourses of society within clusters where the process of growth rises in intensity and at the national level, on topics selected by the National Assembly. At the same time, it noted that there are "a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations." Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation to their scholarly interests that the endeavors of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived.

Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.

Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. It would be fruitful if the elements of this framework most relevant to the work of the Associations for Bahá'í Studies can be consciously and progressively clarified. In this respect, it may be useful to give consideration to insights that have contributed to the community's progress: the relationship between study and action, the need for focus, which is not to be confused with uniformity, the challenge of fostering the capacity of individuals and accompanying others in service, the dynamics of organic development, the institutional arrangements necessary to sustain ever more complex patterns of activity, the coherence required among all areas of endeavor, and sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions. Perhaps the most important of these is learning in action; the friends participate in an ongoing process of action, reflection, study, and consultation in order to address obstacles and share successes, reexamine and revise strategies and methods, and systematize and improve efforts over time.

One of the critical aspects of a conceptual framework that will require careful attention in the years ahead is the generation and application of knowledge, a topic that those gathered at the conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies will explore in August. At the heart of most disciplines of human knowledge is a degree of consensus about methodology—an understanding of methods and how to use them appropriately to systematically investigate reality to achieve reliable results and sound conclusions. Bahá'ís who are involved in various disciplines—economics, education, history, social science, philosophy, and many others—are obviously conversant and fully engaged with the methods employed in their fields. It is they who have the responsibility to earnestly strive to reflect on the implications that the truths found in the Revelation may hold for their work. The principle of the harmony of science and religion, faithfully upheld, will ensure that religious belief does not succumb to superstition and that scientific findings are not appropriated by materialism. The friends who seek to excel in scholarly activity will, of course, strive to live up to the high expectations set forth by Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whatever the extent of their achievements, they are an integral part of the community; they are not exempt from obligations placed upon any believer and, at the same time, deserve the community's understanding, forbearance, support, and respect.

As unity of thought around essential concepts emerges, the Association may find it useful to explore fresh approaches with some simple steps that can grow in complexity. Gradually, those aspects of the conceptual framework pertaining to intellectual inquiry in diverse fields will become clearer and grow richer. For example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts. Special interest groups, such as philosophy or religious studies, could have gatherings to intensify their efforts. Periodic communications or follow-up meetings could be arranged to increase the effectiveness of the participation of these groups of individuals in aspects of the discourse in their chosen fields. Focus could also be directed toward those areas in the academic literature pertaining to the Faith that are ignored or dealt with in a misleading or problematic manner. In addition, existing activities, such as the

hosting of a large conference, may be reimagined. Of course, continued exertions must be directed toward preparing and disseminating articles, periodicals, and books.

One additional point will be central to these reflections. The training institute is pivotal in the development of the capacity of veteran and new believers for active involvement in the work of expansion and consolidation. Beyond this, the institute provides the structure for an educational process with three distinct stages that will increasingly serve cohorts of individuals from age six into adulthood. In the experience offered by the institute, participants are not merely presented with information, but through study of the courses and involvement in the community-building activities in which their lessons find practical expression, they acquire knowledge, skills, and spiritual insights that enable them to effectively foster personal and social change. Yet, whatever the scope of its curriculum and no matter how fundamental it is to the progress of the community, involvement in the institute is only a part of a lifetime of inquiry in which these friends will be engaged—one that will include exploration of the Revelation as well as various disciplines of knowledge. The upcoming youth conferences, which will draw tens of thousands of young people, are representative of swelling numbers who, shaped by the institute process at the dawning of their maturity, will set their footsteps firmly in the path of learning and action that will extend throughout their academic studies and beyond. The House of Justice looks to rising generations of Bahá'ís to wholeheartedly address a wide range of intellectual challenges, overcome all pitfalls and obstacles, and render service for the betterment of the world. In the decades ahead, then, a host of believers will enter diverse social spaces and fields of human endeavor. To this arena, pregnant with possibilities, the Association for Bahá'í Studies can offer an important contribution.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

17 February 2014

To an individual Bahá'í

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The House of Justice was sorry to hear of the continuing difficulties you are experiencing as a devoted member of the community of the Greatest Name and that the clarifications provided in the letter dated 7 November 2010 written to you on its behalf have not assisted in their resolution. It is well aware of the challenges that some of the friends in the United States are facing, which obstruct the progress of expansion and consolidation. These challenges, however, lie not in the provisions of the Plan itself but rather in misunderstandings surrounding those provisions. The House of Justice observes that, occasionally, the discussion concerning the Plan has fallen into a misleading dichotomy: that individuals should engage either in a few narrowly defined activities centered around the training institute or that they should be free to choose any initiative that they wish to undertake without regard for the requirements of the Plan. Wherever this fruitless discussion emerges, in whatever variation, the result is to reduce the enthusiasm and participation of the believers and prevent them from engaging in the process of learning that lies at the heart of the Plan—a process that will, if unitedly and persistently pursued, resolve misconceptions, promote flexibility, and shed light over time on the most effective course of action.

The House of Justice hopes that you will reflect on how this type of discussion may be inadvertently influencing your own conceptions about the Plan. For example, you refer to “teaching in very prescribed ways.” However, the guidance concerning the Plan does not prescribe a particular method of teaching, nor is any method of individual teaching proscribed. You ask whether an individual is free to share views on the progress of activities, yet it should be evident that such a contribution is fundamental to the learning process, which includes study of the guidance, consultation, action, and reflection. This, of course, should be carried out in a manner that seeks to understand and effectively implement the provisions of the Plan lest insistence upon personal opinions trap the friends in interminable debate on dichotomous perspectives and inhibit their understanding and action.

The essence of the series of Plans that have unfolded since 1996 is relatively simple. Individuals, communities, and institutions are called upon, within the context of a cluster, to create a program of growth involving a vibrant, meaningful, and distinctive pattern of collective Bahá'í life, infused by the spirit of the Creative Word, and open not only to the believers but to those from the wider society. At the core of this community-building process are certain activities—devotional gatherings, the educating of children and junior youth, and the raising up of those who can engage in acts of service—that serve as portals for the participation of ever-increasing numbers. The four core activities are but the nucleus of an organic pattern of life that, as the number of individuals who can initiate activities multiplies, increases in complexity over time, eventually requiring coherence among a range of efforts that also includes visits to homes, social gatherings, Feast and Holy Day observances, deepenings, administration, strengthening the Fund, social action, involvement in the discourses of society, and so on. All these activities are sustained and expanded by the constant endeavors of individuals to reach

out to their personal contacts as well as to receptive populations through direct teaching, both personal and collective, and engagement in meaningful conversations. The process of building growing communities is cultivated within three-monthly cycles of planning and action, and it is supported by institutional arrangements at the local, cluster, regional, national, and international levels. In far-flung regions of the earth, the friends in diverse countries are learning to advance the programs of growth in their clusters, ranging from those with a few simple activities to those involving hundreds of activities with the participation of thousands of individuals in a pattern of life that is spiritual, dynamic, united, growing, and transformative in nature. The House of Justice has no doubt that the American believers—who have, over the course of nearly a century of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, achieved a record of distinctive service—have the capacity to stand among the vanguard of this process.

This does not mean, of course, that there are not currently problems in understanding the Plan or putting into place its provisions in various parts of the world, or that new challenges will not arise in the future. In the work of expansion and consolidation, as the House of Justice has repeatedly observed, mistakes will inevitably be made by the friends and new challenges will present themselves. Obstacles, when they arise, are ultimately resolved through perseverance and further experience. Fruitless debate, insistence on personal views, creating false dichotomies, or the “tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction” can be carefully avoided or wisely overcome. It is learning together that is yielding the insights necessary so that “stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress.”

In striving to overcome their difficulties and create new patterns of action, the friends must, whether as individuals or members of institutions, be mindful of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s admonition about the importance of love and fellowship and His assurance that “it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.” The system that Baha’u’llah has brought into the world will take decades and centuries to unfold, attaining ever-increasing levels of complexity, effectiveness, and influence. Shoghi Effendi explained that “we must trust to time, and the guidance of God’s Universal House of Justice, to obtain a clearer and fuller understanding of its provisions and implications.” He also warned that “the promised glories of the Sovereignty which the Bahá’í teachings foreshadow, can be revealed only in the fullness of time.”

The history of the development of the Faith offers a useful perspective. In the first decades of the Formative Age, the friends struggled with the new concepts and practices pertaining to administration presented to them by Shoghi Effendi, who carefully guided them over the years to resolve their misconceptions and disagreements. “One of the main reasons why the Faith does not advance more rapidly is because the friends have not learned to live with, and work within the framework of the Administrative Order,” a letter written on his behalf stated. “Either they crystallize it into too set a form, or they rebel against what they feel to be a System, and do not give it sufficient support.” The challenge was to learn to work according to the guidance given, not to set it aside. Today, after more than nine decades, the Bahá’ís of the world have raised the Administrative Order and forged new relationships among individuals, communities, and institutions on the basis of the exhortations found in the authoritative texts. Much remains to be done, but there has been an obvious and tremendous advance since the first years of the Formative Age—an achievement affirmed not only by Bahá’ís themselves but by a host of outside observers, who have remarked on the unity and efficacy of Bahá’í undertakings in various local and international arenas despite the fewness of our numbers. Since 1996, the believers have, addressing challenges pertaining to the large-scale expansion of the Faith, been called on to conduct their efforts within an evolving framework for action that is required for the

current stage of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. This includes further evolution not only in our approach to growth but also in the associated administrative arrangements, all under the guidance of the House of Justice. Once again, in relation to the current requirements, the friends must avoid the tendency to “crystallize” the guidance into “too set a form” or “rebel against what they feel to be a System” and fail to “give it sufficient support.” In response to such problems in the past, Shoghi Effendi repeatedly urged the friends to better understand the principles of Bahá’í administration and strive to implement them properly. Similarly, the House of Justice can do no more than this, encouraging the friends to better understand the concepts and provisions of the Plan and to strive to implement them effectively-for they are the basis of the progress and development of the Faith in the decades that lie ahead.

The House of Justice hopes that, despite any current challenges in your area, you find joy and abundant confirmations through your wholehearted participation in the teaching field.

Beyond the general points outlined here, the clarification of specific concerns you have raised is best carried out in the context of your community, and you are advised to turn to your National Spiritual Assembly.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ’Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

24 December 2014

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

Further to the letter dated 31 August 2014, sent to you on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, we have been asked to convey the following additional remarks to you.

In its 28 December 2010 message, addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice noted a number of innovations being introduced in relation to administrative arrangements in the most advanced clusters, among them the division of clusters into smaller units, the decentralization of the reflection meeting, the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators, and the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field. Learning about the efficacy of these and other approaches, of course, continues across the globe. In April 2013, the experience that had accrued up to that point was described in the document “Insights from the Frontiers of Learning” prepared by the International Teaching Centre, and the lessons being learned will, no doubt, be further elaborated at the conclusion of the current Plan. Given the rapid changes occurring in the manner that agencies of the Faith organize their work in scores of clusters in the front ranks of the process of growth in your country, it will be useful for all institutions and agencies assisting them in this regard to consider the following points.

As you know, the basic scheme of coordination when an intensive program of growth is established in a cluster often comprises up to three institute coordinators and an Area Teaching Committee of several members, who collaborate with Auxiliary Board members. The further development of this scheme in response to growth results from the understanding obtained through an ongoing process of action, reflection, consultation, and study carried out within the framework set out by the House of Justice and the experience being gained locally and across a region. Naturally, national and regional institutions guide the efforts of the friends in this regard, drawing, as necessary, on the knowledge accumulating across the Bahá'í world that usually reaches them through their interactions with the Counsellors. They are careful, however, that any suggestions they may offer those laboring at the grass roots of the community are not conveyed as instructions, for doing so could stifle the rising capacity for learning among the local friends.

It is understood that the agencies of the Faith in most of your clusters that are experiencing an acceleration in the process of expansion and consolidation have taken the step of dividing the cluster into smaller units for the purpose of administering effectively the activities of the Plan. There are, however, some clusters that cover very large geographic areas where making such divisions might lead to needless complexity. It appears that you have encouraged the friends in those cases to partition the cluster into two or more clusters, applying as much as possible the criteria established by the House of Justice in its message dated 9 January 2000. Care is required to ensure that the resulting clusters do not end up with such small populations that the opportunities for the local friends to learn about achieving large-scale growth are severely limited.

Where the activities of the Faith in a cluster are being administered in several units, the general scheme of coordination has, naturally, become more complex. It is important, however, that the friends guard against making cluster administration overly complex or hierarchical as that could reduce the efficacy of the entire scheme and inadvertently impede the flourishing of relationships among the friends that are conducive to continued progress. It might be possible, for instance, for additional coordinators or assistants to coordinators to be assigned to various parts of a cluster without effectively establishing subordinate layers of cluster administration. Further, whatever form the arrangements take, the friends assuming coordination duties would need to be assisted to enhance their capacity to effectively carry out their responsibilities and become sources of constant encouragement to others if the cluster is to continue to advance. As the House of Justice stated in its Ridván 2010 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, "sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress." This is a matter of great importance that requires institutions and agencies at the regional level to further develop their ability to formulate clear approaches and plans to help those serving at the cluster level to become increasingly adept at their work.

Another related matter concerns the facilitation of activities in neighborhoods and villages. An increase in the number of people engaged in community-building activities at that level requires that the capacity to accompany these friends grows considerably. As may have been experienced in your community, it would be unreasonable to expect that such capacity would be built by simply assigning more and more coordinators to a cluster. It is therefore heartening that the agencies of the Faith in your most advanced clusters are learning to nurture interactions among the friends serving together whereby those more experienced in a particular act of service can support others. Whatever terms are used to refer to such experienced friends, it is better at this early stage not to consider them as constituting a new position in the scheme of coordination that requires formal appointment and official designations. To do so might introduce rigidity into a mode of operation that, to be effective, needs to remain dynamic and flexible.

At the level of neighborhoods and villages, continued attention also needs to be given to the role that Local Spiritual Assemblies are playing in supporting the efforts of the friends.

Your community is blessed with many well-established Local Assemblies. Their efforts, in collaboration with Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, to stimulate and encourage the friends serving the Faith can be further augmented. This is an area of learning that you and the Counsellors may want to explore during the remaining period of the Plan, focusing perhaps on a few clusters and a selected number of Local Assemblies. It is hoped that this might also aid you to gain some insights into how encouragement and support offered to the friends by Local Assemblies could contribute to keeping the expansion of cluster-level structures within certain limits.

One matter that seemed to be of great concern to your members during the consultations at the Bahá'í World Centre was the rising number of friends who are serving the Faith full-time and receiving some remuneration. While any impression that individuals are to be compensated for offering service in relation to the community-building activities of the Plan is to be avoided, the growing complexity of the coordination work in many clusters cannot be sustained solely through those who are only able to give a portion of their time. It is necessary that some friends dedicate themselves fully to such work in the cluster, but it is not realistic to expect that all of these, regardless of circumstances and the time devoted to service, would be able to do so on a purely voluntary basis. Some among them would, no doubt, require financial assistance.

Such remuneration to friends serving at the cluster level is, nonetheless, essentially a short-term arrangement. On the basis of the experience in your country, you and the Counsellors may find it helpful to determine what would, in general, constitute a reasonable period during which an individual serving in a coordination role at the cluster level may be provided with remuneration. However, when the need to offer an individual financial assistance is recognized, it might be useful for the relevant agency to have a conversation with him or her in order to ascertain legitimate needs and the period during which financial support will be necessary. While in the majority of cases such support might be given by means of a stipend, in others, alternative approaches may be employed. To decide the level of assistance, factors that could be taken into consideration include whether the person resides in a rural or urban area, is required to change residence, has a family, or intends to pursue further education. While differing circumstances of individuals may call for various approaches, it is important to ensure that there is a degree of consistency in terms of the remuneration offered. It is, of course, understandable that the institutions would be unable to offer remuneration to an individual whose needs exceed what can reasonably be met by the funds of the Faith. Further, unless circumstances make it absolutely necessary, it would be best to avoid offering remuneration to friends serving at the level of the neighborhood or village.

The House of Justice is certain that your community will continue to make a significant contribution to learning about administrative arrangements in clusters in the front ranks of the process of growth as the Bahá'í world draws closer to the conclusion of the current Plan, and it will pray in the Holy Shrines that Baha'u'llah may confirm your efforts.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

5 January 2015

The National Spiritual Assembly of
the Bahá'ís of the United States

Dearly loved Friends,

In November, the Universal House of Justice had the opportunity to consult with the International Teaching Centre and the Counsellors serving North America. From these consultations, as well as other recent occasions when the progress of growth in your nation has been reviewed, the House of Justice noted with pleasure the concentration of energies directed by your institution to the progress of the Five Year Plan. You have worked diligently and effectively, in close collaboration with the Counsellors, to consolidate the changes brought about by the reorganization of your regions in 2012. Attention has been given to guiding Regional Bahá'í Councils, establishing programs of growth in every goal cluster, and supporting the work of learning sites and the associated institute coordinators in nearly doubling the size and reach of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. Steps have been taken to enhance involvement in the life of society at the level of thought and action. Beginning with the successful youth conferences held last year, your community, like many others, has demonstrated an ability to reach out to young people, Bahá'ís and others, raising their vision and stimulating their desire to contribute to the betterment of society, particularly by attending to the needs of those younger than themselves. And most recently, there has been renewed focus on engaging simultaneously in multiple lines of action and ensuring coherence as you do so. Work in each of these areas will, no doubt, be wisely and systematically extended as the measures you have put into place to build capacity for learning from the cluster to the national level gradually bear fruit. This must include reinvigorating aspects of the Plan that may have waned to some extent, such as the dynamism of the regional institutes, the engagement of the generality of the friends in a cluster in the pattern of community building, and the efforts of Area Teaching Committees to maintain the rhythm of three-month cycles of activity. In this regard, a few comments are offered for your consideration.

A steady flow of individuals through the sequence of courses is required if the training institute is to prepare the human resources necessary to respond to the demands of the process of growth at ever-higher levels of complexity. The first stage in the development of the institute process in your country drew largely upon the participation of veteran believers. Another considerable advance came when, following the regional conferences in 2008 at the midpoint of the last Plan, there was a marked upsurge in the involvement of the believers and their friends in the institute process. And whilst it is clear that the programs of the institute will continue to be offered to anyone, what is equally clear is that your community is now poised for a major turning point as you labor to realize the potential for the movement of thousands of young people through the sequence of courses. When buttressed by the wholehearted support of the community, such a movement would not only lend impetus to the advancement of clusters throughout the United States, but this focus on working with so significant a number of youth will also naturally shape the next phase of the development of training institutes in your country. An effective approach to attracting young people has already been demonstrated, first at the conferences and subsequently in local gatherings. Attention can now be directed to learning how to translate their initial interest into systematic and well-integrated involvement in community-building

endeavors in a cluster. Among the questions to be addressed are how to deepen conversations and expand bonds of friendship within groups of youth, how to foster and sustain acts of service, how to teach those who demonstrate interest in the Faith, and how to combine the activities of the youth within the larger pattern of cluster activities. Central to this inquiry is to learn how to assist as many young people as possible to study the sequence of courses in order to raise their capacity and broaden the scope of their action. Efforts must be redoubled, then, to strengthen regional institutes-enhancing the functioning of their boards, their regional and sub-regional arrangements, their cluster coordinators, and their tutors. By learning how to raise up and accompany even a few dedicated and effective tutors in each cluster, institutes can provide for the capacity that is required for the movement of a sizable number of individuals through the sequence of courses each year. The national gathering for regional coordinators in November appears to have contributed significantly to unity of thought toward advancing these aims.

The capacity to reach young people and assist them in carrying out acts of service, especially for establishing junior youth groups and children's classes in neighborhoods that have become centers of intense activity, offers great promise for the progress of clusters at every juncture along their path of development. However, experience has demonstrated that the process of community building falters if there is a sense that the work of the Plan is confined to the young or to certain neighborhoods alone. The House of Justice has emphasized the importance of a two-pronged approach to expansion and consolidation, involving endeavors throughout the localities in a cluster as well as in one or more receptive neighborhoods. The full pattern of activity envisioned for a thriving community requires involvement of the generality of believers. The friends everywhere can be assisted to overcome dichotomies, to grasp the intent of the Plan's community-building activities, and to determine the place each will choose in contributing to the collective effort.

The participation of greater numbers of individuals in the activities of a cluster requires a strong Area Teaching Committee. Regional Councils should be assisted to learn systematically how these committees emerge organically, as a program of growth intensifies, and contribute to the advancement of a cluster, cycle after cycle. The mobilization of individuals to ensure steady progress of the program of growth is the principal focus of the Area Teaching Committee. It fosters the process of reflection and planning by organizing the reflection meeting, facilitating a sound reading of the cluster's reality, and arranging for the accurate gathering and careful analysis of its statistics-all of which expand vision, build unity of thought, and illuminate the path for the progress of the cluster. Just as the training institute works closely to guide and accompany the friends who initiate children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, the Area Teaching Committee can encourage and support many individuals to carry out other acts of service, such as hosting devotional gatherings, undertaking home visits, and teaching the Faith. These are not merely activities to be multiplied but fundamental aspects of Bahá'í community life intended for all. Devotional gatherings, for example, steadily multiply to include all of the believers in a cluster as well as many of their associates. The teaching work is broad in scope, encompassing personal efforts as well as collective projects, selected neighborhoods as well as sundry localities, chosen populations as well as chance acquaintances, firesides as well as core activities. In this manner, the participation of more and more believers in the community-building activities of the Plan has profound implications at the level of culture. Devotional gatherings, the embryo of the local Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, kindle the stirrings of the spirit and ignite the flame of service. Visiting one another's homes weaves bonds of love and union. Teaching becomes a way of life.

This attention to the strengthening of training institutes and Area Teaching Committees will complement the efforts already under way to accelerate the expansion of the junior youth program. Indeed, a dynamic collaboration between the training institutes and the learning sites will disseminate practices that have proven to be effective so that the program can take root in clusters throughout the country.

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, that matchless call for action to your stalwart community, Shoghi Effendi refers to the “enthusiastic eagerness” of the believers in North America “to arise and display, in the vast field traced for them by the pen of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, their capacity to play their part in the work of universal redemption proclaimed by Baha’u’llah” when confronted by a world “dimmed by the steadily dying-out light of religion, heaving with the explosive forces of a blind and triumphant nationalism; scorched with the fires of pitiless persecution, whether racial or religious; deluded by the false theories and doctrines that threaten to supplant the worship of God and the sanctification of His laws; enervated by a rampant and brutal materialism; disintegrating through the corrosive influence of moral and spiritual decadence; and enmeshed in the coils of economic anarchy and strife.” The House of Justice has every confidence in the ability of your institution to reawaken this enthusiastic eagerness for service throughout your community in order to raise expansion and consolidation to unprecedented levels. It is evident that once you are able to learn to replicate the pattern of intensive action within your most advanced clusters in the hundreds of other clusters where a program of growth has been initiated, it will be possible to engage tens, and eventually hundreds of thousands of individuals in a vibrant, meaningful, and distinctive pattern of Bahá’í community life, open to all. Be assured of the prayers of the House of Justice at the Sacred Threshold that the friends in the United States may realize this high aim in the years ahead.

WITH LOVING BAHÁ’Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

9 October 2015

To a National Spiritual Assembly

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

... As you know, technological advancement is integral to the emergence of a global civilization. Indeed, the Internet is a manifestation of a development anticipated by the Guardian when, in describing the characteristics of a unified humanity, he foresaw that a “mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity.” Yet, learning to utilize the Internet in a manner conducive to material and spiritual progress is an immense challenge.

The Internet makes it possible for Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired content to become accessible to a wide audience. In this connection, the House of Justice has encouraged the strengthening of the official Bahá'í presence on the World Wide Web, and it has been pleased to see the many advances made, especially in recent years, and looks forward to the further unfoldment of this process. Beyond that, many believers around the world, each according to his or her circumstances and in coherence with other endeavors of the community, use the Internet as a medium for promoting Baha'u'llah's vision of a new World Order, and it is natural for the friends to explore different ways to do so. However, given that the Internet allows for the instantaneous dissemination of content among growing multitudes, wisdom and self-discipline are required lest the significance or dignity of the Teachings become compromised by an unbecoming, inaccurate, or trivialized presentation.

A related consideration is that the institutions of the Faith are charged with the responsibility for creating and maintaining official sources of information about the Faith, such as national and international websites, regularly assessing the presentation of the Faith on the World Wide Web and providing the necessary guidance to individuals. The friends are generally free to determine what aspects of the Teachings they wish to touch upon in their contributions but in doing so should clearly distinguish their sites from those created by the institutions. This can be accomplished through a variety of means, including the name, description, or design of a site. While in the past the friends have at times been encouraged to refrain from using the word “Bahá'í,” or forms of it, in the name of their websites, experience has demonstrated that this may not always be necessary if other aspects of the site unmistakably identify it as an individual initiative. In addition, individuals will no doubt wish to avoid a tone that could be perceived as authoritative or instructional. They will also want to steer away from areas that lie exclusively within the sphere of institutional responsibility, such as offering a comprehensive collection of the writings and of the messages of the House of Justice or an exhaustive calendar of Bahá'í events across many countries. This becomes particularly significant when the visibility of a website increases and it gains prominence. As the institutions guide the friends in adopting the proper posture, the aim is not to unduly restrict their efforts but to avoid confusion and misinformation.

Notwithstanding that a site may, of course, be accessed from any part of the world, a Bahá'í who seeks to establish a personal site should determine what would be an appropriate audience to address and the

scope of subjects to be covered. For example, while it may be beneficial to reflect on the nature and form of the core activities, especially in the context of the experience of a cluster or region, certain problems arise in attempting to create a site that aims to speak to Bahá'ís worldwide about the subject. Such an approach could lead to the cultural norms and values of a particular population being promoted to a universal audience—a pattern all too prevalent in the world today. There is also the danger of exerting an unintended influence on the process of learning unfolding at the grass roots, where individuals, communities, and institutions are acting as protagonists of their own growth and development. The perspectives offered in the following extract from the message dated 12 December 2001 from the House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies—although in the specific context of artistic endeavors and supplementary educational materials—are especially relevant to aspects of culture mentioned above:

Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Baha'u'llah, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give license to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted.

An overarching principle which should guide the efforts of the friends in their communications on the Internet pertains to the use of language. Baha'u'llah refers to human utterance as “an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation,” and He enjoins His followers to “speak with words as mild as milk, that the children of men may be nurtured and edified thereby and may attain the ultimate goal of human existence which is the station of true understanding and nobility.” The House of Justice in its letter dated 29 December 1988 to the Bahá'ís in the United States observed: “Speech is a powerful phenomenon. Its freedom is both to be extolled and feared. It calls for an acute exercise of judgment, since both the limitation of speech and the excess of it can lead to dire consequences.” With this in mind, Bahá'ís should embody moderation, courtesy, and humility in any discussion in which they take part—whether in person or online. They should recognize and transcend negative habits of thought and expression absorbed from society, often unconsciously, and be on their guard lest they acquire the tendency to reduce the Faith or the processes of the Divine Plan into a simplistic or prescriptive set of points or steps, often conveyed in an unjustifiably authoritative or irreverent tone, or presume to speak with a voice that appears more representative than it can ever be. In this regard, those managing various sites will need to give thought to their own underlying attitudes that may be conveyed through content and manner of expression. In striving for such heightened consciousness, questions to be reflected upon may, for instance, include: How will they avoid the unthinking adoption of fads prevalent online that may undermine their purpose? Is the type of humor employed appropriate? How will the content be perceived by someone who is not familiar with the Faith? As they aspire to achieve the Bahá'í standard, the friends should endeavor to rise above, rather than emulate,

widely employed techniques of persuasion and sensationalism, which are often reductive or crass, and must always remain conscious that they are striving for “an etiquette of expression worthy of the approaching maturity of the human race.”

WITH LOVING BAHÁ'Í GREETINGS,
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

PART III

Supplementary Material

26 November 2012
“Social Action”

**A document prepared by the Office of Social
and Economic Development
at the Bahá’í World Centre**

In its Ridván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá’ís of the world to reflect on the contributions that their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this connection, the House of Justice made reference to the process of community building set in motion in so many clusters across the globe by the core activities associated with the current series of global Plans. “A rich tapestry of community life”, it was noted, “begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children.” “Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example,” the message went on to explain, “lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth.” The House of Justice then made the following statement: “Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community’s engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase.” Later in the same message, the House of Justice defined the sphere of social action in these terms:

Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programmes of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá’í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly.

To contribute to discussions under way at all levels of the Bahá’í community about the nature of its involvement in social action, we have prepared this paper on the basis of experience gained over the years in the area of social and economic development. The insights presented are drawn from relatively complex development endeavours, yet they shed light on the character of initiatives across the entire spectrum, as all instances of social action, irrespective of size, rely on a shared set of concepts, principles, methods, and approaches.

I. The Bahá’í world’s involvement in social and economic development

The endeavours of the worldwide Bahá’í community can be seen in terms of a number of interacting processes—the spiritual enrichment of the individual, the development of local and national communities, the maturation of administrative institutions, to mention but a few—which trace their origins back to the time of Bahá’u’lláh Himself and which gathered strength during the ministries of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. Under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, these processes have continued to advance steadily: the scope of their influence has gradually been extended

and new dimensions added to their operation. Social and economic development is among them. This particular process, pursued most notably through a variety of educational activities down the years, received considerable impetus in 1983, when the House of Justice, in a message dated 20 October, asked for “systematic attention” to be given to this area of activity following the rapid expansion of the Bahá’í community during the 1970s.

The 1983 message emphasized that progress in the development field would depend largely on natural stirrings at the grassroots of the community. It also announced the establishment of the Office of Social and Economic Development (OSED) at the Bahá’í World Centre to “promote and coordinate the activities of the friends” in this field. Bahá’ís in every continent sought to respond to the call raised in the message in a number of ways, and the ensuing ten years constituted a period of experimentation, characterized simultaneously by enthusiasm and hesitation, thoughtful planning and haphazard action, achievements and setbacks. While most projects found it difficult to escape the patterns of development practice prevalent in the world, some offered glimpses of promising paradigms of action. From this initial decade of diverse activity, then, the Bahá’í community emerged with the pursuit of social and economic development firmly established as a feature of its organic life and with enhanced capacity to forge over time a distinctly Bahá’í approach.

In September 1993, the document “Bahá’í Social and Economic Development: Prospects for the Future”, prepared at the World Centre, was approved by the Universal House of Justice for use by OSED in orienting and guiding the work in this area. It set the stage for the next ten years of activity and beyond. Drawing on the significant body of experience that had accumulated over the preceding decade, the document elaborated several features common to all such efforts. Awareness worldwide of the nature of Bahá’í social and economic development grew significantly during this period as a result, and a highly consistent, much more systematic approach began to take shape. The vision that emerged at the time called for the promotion of development activities at different levels of complexity. Most central to this vision was the question of capacity building. That activities should start on a modest scale and only grow in complexity in keeping with available human resources was a concept that gradually came to influence development thought and practice.

In 2001, the Universal House of Justice introduced to the Bahá’í world the concept of a cluster—a geographic construct, generally defined as a group of villages or as a city with its surrounding suburbs, intended to assist in planning and implementing activities associated with community life. This step was made possible by the establishment of training institutes at the national and regional levels during the 1990s, which employed a system of distance education to reach large numbers with a sequence of courses designed to increase capacity for service. The House of Justice encouraged the Bahá’í world to extend this system progressively to more and more clusters in order to promote their steady progress, laying first the strong spiritual foundations upon which a vibrant community life is built. Efforts in a cluster were initially to focus on the multiplication of certain core activities, open to all of the inhabitants, but with a view to developing the collective capacity needed to address in due time various aspects of the social and economic life of the population as well.

In the decade that followed, then, social action would increasingly come to be conceived within the context of the cluster. The conception of grassroots social action that began to emerge was thus able to assume a much more pronounced collective dimension than had been previously articulated. During the same period, notable progress was also being made by OSED in its attempts to help systematize the experience of especially promising programmes and to learn about structures and methods required to

enable communities around the world not only to benefit from them but to contribute to their further advancement. Today, in the establishment of continental and subcontinental offices—each serving either a network of sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or a group of Bahá'í-inspired organizations dedicated to the promotion of some other educational programme—can be seen the first fruits of OSIED's efforts to raise up structures across the globe to enhance collective capacity for this purpose. Underscoring the importance of what has been achieved so far, the Universal House of Justice wrote in its message dated 28 December 2010:

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.

Accomplishments over the past three decades in the area of social and economic development, then, combined with the consistent rise in human resources in clusters everywhere, have brought the Bahá'í world to a new stage in its efforts to engage in grassroots social action.

II. A framework for collective learning

The mode of operation adopted in the area of social and economic development, in common with other areas of Bahá'í activity, is one of learning in action. When efforts are carried out in a learning mode—characterized by constant action, reflection, consultation, and study—visions and strategies are re-examined time and again. As tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied, and lessons learned, modifications are made in goals and methods. The learning process, which is given direction through appropriate institutional arrangements, unfolds in a way that resembles the growth and differentiation of a living organism. Haphazard change is avoided, and continuity of action maintained.

On several occasions, the Universal House of Justice, referring to the way in which those serving at the level of the cluster will be drawn further and further into the life of society, has indicated: “In the approaches you take, the methods you adopt, and the instruments you employ, you will need to achieve the same degree of coherence that characterizes the pattern of growth presently under way.” How the first stirrings in the area of social action will manifest themselves in cluster after cluster where the dual process of expansion and consolidation is robust, the extent to which cultivation and direction from the institutions will be required, and the ways in which endeavours of social action will strengthen the fabric of community life—these are among the issues that will be the subject of an increasingly intense process of learning in the coming years.

Achieving progressively higher degrees of coherence both within and among the broad interconnected fields of endeavour in which the Bahá'í community is engaged is clearly a vital concern. It suggests that areas of activity are to be complementary, integrated, and mutually supportive. Further, it implies the existence of a common, overarching framework that gives shape to activities and which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates. The expression of the diverse elements of the framework will not, of course, be uniform in all spheres of action. In relation to any given area of activity, some elements move to the fore, while others act only in the background. The next three sections of this document describe a few of these, identified over many years of experience, as they find expression in social action.

Among the elements most relevant to social action are statements that define the character of progress—that civilization has both a material and a spiritual dimension, that humanity is on the threshold of its collective maturity, that there are destructive and constructive forces operating in the world which serve to propel humanity along the path towards its full maturity, that the relationships necessary to sustain society must be recast in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, that the transformation required must occur simultaneously within human consciousness and the structure of social institutions. Such statements shed light on the nature of Bahá'í development efforts, a topic taken up in Section III of the document.

Other elements that speak to the nature of social action are derived from a particular perspective on the role of knowledge in the development of society. The complementarity of science and religion, the imperative of spiritual and material education, the influence of values inherent to technology on the organization of society, and the relevance of appropriate technology to social progress are among the issues involved. Views related to the generation and application of knowledge have implications not only for the nature of development but also for the question of methodology, which is the theme of Section IV. Implicit in the discussions of Sections III and IV is yet another set of elements of the framework, namely, those statements that analyse concepts such as individualism, power, authority, personal comfort, selfless service, work, and excellence.

Finally, at the heart of the conceptual framework for social action lie elements that describe beliefs about fundamental issues of existence, such as the nature of the human being, the purpose of life, the oneness of humanity, and the equality of men and women. While for Bahá'ís these touch on immutable convictions, they are not static—the way in which they are understood and find expression in various contexts evolves over time. Many of these convictions underlie the discussion elaborated throughout the document; a few are explicitly addressed in Section V to illustrate their implications for development work.

III. The nature of Bahá'í social and economic development

Bahá'í activity in the field of social and economic development seeks to promote the well-being of people of all walks of life, whatever their beliefs or background. It represents the efforts of the Bahá'í community to effect constructive social change, as it learns to apply the teachings of the Faith, together with knowledge accumulated in different fields of human endeavour, to social reality. Its purpose is neither to proclaim the Cause nor to serve as a vehicle for conversion. What follows below is a discussion of some of the elements of the conceptual framework that help to define its nature.

(i) Coherence between the spiritual and the material

An exploration of the nature of social action, undertaken from a Bahá'í perspective, must necessarily place it in the broad context of the advancement of civilization. That a global civilization which is both materially and spiritually prosperous represents the next stage of a millennia-long process of social evolution provides a conception of history that endows every instance of social action with a particular purpose: to foster true prosperity, with its spiritual and material dimensions, among the diverse inhabitants of the planet. A concept of vital relevance, then, is the imperative to achieve a dynamic coherence between the practical and spiritual requirements of life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that while “material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind,” until it is “combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained”. He continues:

Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness.

To seek coherence between the spiritual and the material does not imply that the material goals of development are to be trivialized. It does require, however, the rejection of approaches to development which define it as the transfer to all societies of the ideological convictions, the social structures, the economic practices, the models of governance—in the final analysis, the very patterns of life—prevalent in certain highly industrialized regions of the world. When the material and spiritual dimensions of the life of a community are kept in mind and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, the tendency to reduce development to the mere consumption of goods and services and the naive use of technological packages is avoided. Scientific knowledge, to take but one simple example, helps the members of a community to analyse the physical and social implications of a given technological proposal—say, its environmental impact—and spiritual insight gives rise to moral imperatives that uphold social harmony and that ensure technology serves the common good. Together, these two sources of knowledge tap roots of motivation in individuals and communities, so essential in breaking free from the shelter of passivity, and enable them to uncover the traps of consumerism.

Although the relevance of scientific knowledge to development efforts is readily acknowledged in the world at large, there appears to be less agreement on the part to be played by religion. Too often views about religion carry with them notions of division, strife, and repression, creating a reluctance to turn to it as a source of knowledge—even among those who question the adequacy of entirely materialistic approaches. Interestingly, the high esteem in which science is held does not necessarily imply that its practice and purpose are well understood. Its underlying meaning, too, is surrounded by misconception. Not infrequently it is conceived in terms of the application of certain techniques and formulas, which, as if by magic, lead to this or that effect. It is not surprising, then, that what is considered to be religious knowledge is not in harmony with science, and much of what is propagated in the name of science denies the spiritual capacities cultivated by religion.

Social action, of whatever size and complexity, should strive to remain free of simplistic and distorted conceptions of science and religion. To this end, an imaginary duality between reason and faith—a duality that would confine reason to the realm of empirical evidence and logical argumentation and which would associate faith with superstition and irrational thought—must be avoided. The process of development has to be rational and systematic—incorporating, for example, scientific capabilities of observing, of measuring, of rigorously testing ideas—and at the same time deeply aware of faith and spiritual convictions. In the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “faith compriseth both knowledge and the performance of good works.” Faith and reason can best be understood as attributes of the human soul through which insights and knowledge can be gained about the physical and the spiritual dimensions of existence. They make it possible to recognize the powers and capacities latent in individuals and in humanity as a whole and enable people to work for the realization of these potentialities.

(ii) *Participation*

A civilization befitting a humanity which, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, is coming of age will not emerge through the efforts exerted by a select group of nations or even a network of national and international agencies. Rather, the challenge must be faced by all of humanity. Every member of the human family has not only the right to benefit from a materially and spiritually prosperous civilization but also an obligation to contribute towards its construction. Social action should operate, then, on the principle of universal participation.

Issues related to participation have been discussed at length in development literature. Yet, in both theory and practice, this vital principle has often been approached at the level of technique—for example, through the utilization of surveys and focus groups. Such tools, of course, have their merits, as do more ambitious efforts intended to increase participation in political processes or to offer training to the beneficiaries of services delivered by one or another governmental or non-governmental agency. Still, these measures seem to fall short of the kind of participation envisioned above. What appears to be called for in any given region, microregion or cluster is the involvement of a growing number of people in a collective process of learning, one which is focused on the nature and dynamics of a path that conduces to the material and spiritual progress of their villages or neighbourhoods. Such a process would allow its participants to engage in the generation, application, and diffusion of knowledge, a most potent and indispensable force in the advancement of civilization.

In this connection, it is important to realize that the application and propagation of existing knowledge is invariably accompanied by the generation of new knowledge—much of which takes the form of insights acquired through experience. Here the systematization of learning is crucial. As a group of people working at the grassroots begins to gain experience in social action, the first lessons learned may consist of little more than occasional stories, anecdotes, and personal accounts. Over time, patterns tend to emerge which can be documented and carefully analysed. To facilitate the systematization of knowledge, appropriate structures have to be put in place at the local level, among them institutions and agencies invested with authority to safeguard the integrity of the learning process and to ensure that it is not reduced to opinion or the mere collection of various experiences—in short, to see to it that veritable knowledge is generated. In this regard, the authority invested in the institutions of the Administrative Order working at the grassroots to harmonize individual volition with collective will endows the Bahá'í community with a remarkable capacity to nurture participation.

No matter how essential, a process of learning at the local level will remain limited in its effectiveness if it is not connected to a global process concerned with the material and spiritual prosperity of humanity as a whole. Structures are required, then, at all levels, from the local to the international, to facilitate learning about development. At the international level, such learning calls for a degree of conceptualization that takes into account the broader processes of global transformation under way and which serves to adjust the overall direction of development activities accordingly. In this respect, OSED sees itself as a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience made possible by the participation of increasing numbers of individuals, agencies, and communities. As this participation widens, the Office strives to develop its own capacity to observe activity at the grassroots, to identify and analyse patterns that emerge under one or more sets of circumstances, and to disseminate the knowledge thus generated, strengthening structures for this purpose and lending impetus to the process of learning at all levels. The approach to development that comes into focus, then, defies categorization into either “top-down” or “bottom-up”; it is one, rather, of reciprocity and interconnectedness.

(iii) Capacity building

When development is seen in terms of the participation of more and more people in a collective process of learning, then the concept of capacity building assumes particular importance. Thus, while any instance of social action would naturally aim at improving some aspect of the life of a population, it cannot focus simply on the provision of goods and services—an approach to development so prevalent in the world today, one which often carries with it attitudes of paternalism and which employs methods that disempower those who should be the protagonists of change. Setting and achieving specific goals to improve conditions is a legitimate concern of social action; yet, far more essential is the accompanying rise in the capacity of the participants in an endeavour to contribute to progress. Of course, the imperative to build capacity is not only relevant to the individual, important though that may be; it is equally applicable to institutions and the community, the other two protagonists in the advancement of civilization.

At the level of the individual, the influence of the training institute is vital. As it helps to equip individuals with the spiritual insights and knowledge, the qualities and attitudes, and the skills and abilities needed to carry out acts of service integral to Bahá'í community life, the institute creates a pool of human resources that makes it possible for endeavours of social and economic development to flourish. The participants in such endeavours are able to acquire, in turn, knowledge and skills pertinent to the specific areas of action in which they are engaged—health, agricultural production, and education, to name but a few—while continuing to strengthen those capacities already cultivated by the institute, for instance, fostering unity in diversity, promoting justice, participating effectively in consultation, and accompanying others in their efforts to serve humanity.

Similarly, the question of institutional capacity requires due attention. As the institutions of the Faith gain experience, particularly in the context of their efforts to ensure that the provisions of the global Plans are met, they become increasingly adept at offering assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance to appropriate initiatives; at consulting freely and harmoniously among themselves and with people they serve; and at channelling individual and collective energies towards the transformation of society. So, too, must every effort pursued in the sphere of social action consider the question of institutional capacity. After all, even the smallest group of individuals labouring at the grassroots must be able to maintain a consultative environment characterized by qualities of honesty, fairness, patience, tolerance, and courtesy. At a higher level of complexity, an organization dedicated to social action needs to develop the capacity to read society and identify the forces operating within it, to translate a vision of progress into projects and distinct, interconnected lines of action, to manage financial resources, and to interact with both governmental and non-governmental agencies.

The building of capacity in individuals and institutions goes hand in hand with the development of communities. In villages and neighbourhoods throughout the world, Bahá'ís are engaged in activities that enrich the devotional character of their communities, that tend to the spiritual education of children, that enhance the spiritual perception of junior youth and strengthen their powers of expression, and that enable increasing numbers to explore the application of the teachings of the Faith to their individual and collective lives. A process of community development, however, needs to reach beyond the level of activity and concern itself with those modes of expression and patterns of thought and behaviour that are to characterize a humanity which has come of age. In short, it must enter into the realm of culture. Viewed in this light, social action can become an occasion to raise collective consciousness of such vital principles as oneness, justice, and the equality of women and men; to promote an environment distinguished by traits such as truthfulness, equity, trustworthiness, and

generosity; to enhance the ability of a community to resist the influence of destructive social forces; to demonstrate the value of cooperation as an organizing principle for activity; to fortify collective volition; and to infuse practice with insight from the teachings. For, in the final analysis, many of the questions most central to the emergence of a prosperous global civilization are to be addressed at the level of culture.

What seems necessary to acknowledge here is that the increase of capacity in each of these three protagonists does not occur in isolation; the development of any one is inextricably linked to the progress of the other two. The following statement of Shoghi Effendi speaks to this point:

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.

(iv) Degrees of complexity

That the development process is inherently complex is undeniable. It can involve activity in areas such as agriculture and animal husbandry, manufacturing and marketing, the management of funds and natural resources, health and sanitation, education and socialization, communication and community organization. The knowledge that must be brought to bear on the development concerns of the communities of the world, then, does not fit into a single area or discipline. Interdisciplinary and multisectoral action is clearly called for. Yet the capacity to pursue such coordinated action will only appear in the Bahá'í community over the course of decades, as will the capacity to address development issues at increasingly higher levels of complexity and effectiveness.

Social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by small groups of individuals to programmes of social and economic development with some level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Experience makes clear that the interplay of processes that give rise to social action does not lend itself to a single formulaic description. Irrespective of circumstances, however, the scope and complexity of social action at any given moment must be commensurate with the human resources available in a community to carry it forward. What is more, ownership of the undertaking rests with the community itself, which suggests the existence of a certain degree of collective will.

Efforts, whatever their specific nature, generally begin on a modest scale. Often, in a locality where the educational activities of the training institute are firmly established and a pronounced sense of community exists, the first stirrings of heightened social awareness can be observed in the emergence of a small group which, addressing a particular social and economic reality, initiates a simple set of appropriate actions. While some efforts of this kind will naturally come to a close when their objectives have been met, others will continue. Insistence on perpetuating or even expanding every initiative, whether in terms of number of participants, expenditure, geographical coverage or complexity of work, is counterproductive. Yet there may be circumstances in which efforts will, through a continuous process of consultation, action, and reflection, give rise to an endeavour of a more sustained nature. What is important in such cases is that those involved be allowed to increase the range of their activities in an organic fashion, without undue pressure from opinions that are often based solely on theoretical considerations. The process moves forward in a flexible way as they reflect on the results of experience. The Local Spiritual Assembly, of course, serves as the voice of moral authority to make

certain that, as small groups of individuals strive to improve conditions, the integrity of their endeavours is not compromised. It also remains ever vigilant, ensuring that efforts do not run counter to the overall direction in which the community is moving.

At some point, members of the community may also be able to take advantage of educational programmes promoted by a Bahá'í-inspired organization operating in the region, supported by OSED. The steady expansion of such a programme in the community will serve to increase its human resources and to reinforce organizational structures that sustain ongoing work. Eventually many of those who benefit from such programmes will, in turn, bend their energies towards the implementation of the kind of grassroots social action mentioned above. Yet, here again, whatever the ultimate vision, care is taken to begin work in a single area of action and to expand activities gradually over time. A community school, for example, can in principle become a centre for activities such as agricultural production, health education, and family counselling. But, in most cases, it is advisable for it to start simply as a school, focusing all of its resources on the children it proposes to serve.

In this respect, OSED's efforts to strengthen the institutional capacity of Bahá'í-inspired organizations take on significance, and a few words should be added here about the appearance of such organizations worldwide. Whether in the practice of their professions, in the discharge of occupational responsibilities, or in dealings of other kinds, all Bahá'ís derive inspiration from the teachings and principles of the Faith and endeavour to reflect their high standards in day-to-day interactions. Further, given the nature of the field of development, a number of Bahá'ís will choose to associate themselves with one or another national or international agency working for the good of humankind and will, to the extent possible, bring Bahá'í teachings to bear on their operations. In this sense their efforts are inspired by the Faith. Yet, in the context of the work of the Bahá'í community itself, the term has come to be used in a very specific way. Typically brought into being by a small group of believers, a Bahá'í-inspired organization—while remaining under the general guidance and moral authority of Bahá'í institutions—can pursue a range of development initiatives in a region with a degree of latitude in administering its daily affairs. When such an organization is established, emphasis is naturally placed on the quality of its activities; clarity about an optimal size is gradually achieved as the notion that “bigger is better” is set aside. Bahá'í institutions and agencies, including OSED, provide encouragement and direction and, where appropriate, channel resources to these organizations. A small handful of these have, over many years, evolved into fully fledged development organizations with the capacity to engage in relatively complex areas of activity and to establish working relations with the agencies of government and civil society.

However useful the concept of a Bahá'í-inspired organization may be, its application under diverse circumstances requires careful consideration. The way that such an organization emerges from the life of a region and contributes to its progress is of paramount importance. Its establishment cannot be haphazard, nor can its creation proceed solely from the longing of two or three individuals to fulfil a personal, albeit altruistic, desire. A Bahá'í-inspired organization operating in a region derives meaning, in part, from its relationship to other activities; it is one of several interacting endeavours through which consistent progress is achieved. The value of such organizations in the different regions of the world to the development work is evident. Yet, the transformative power of thousands upon thousands of simple actions undertaken at the grassroots tied together in a common framework should not be underestimated.

(v) *Flow of resources*

All Bahá'í activity is carried forward in light of a fundamental belief in the oneness of humankind. All contribute their talents and resources to the advancement of a common purpose, and all share in the joy of progress. Clearly, then, the emphasis placed on local action should not be construed as favouring isolation.

Social and economic development requires the flow of resources, both material and intellectual. Bahá'í communities are linked by institutions and agencies at the local, regional, national, continental, and international levels, each committed to upholding the principle of the oneness of humankind. These institutional arrangements allow for resources to flow in a structured and systematic manner, and communities in rural areas as well as in highly industrialized regions benefit equally from them. The practice of dividing the world into dichotomous groups of “the developed” and “the underdeveloped”, of “the advanced” and “the backward”, is foreign to Bahá'í efforts in the field of development—indeed, to all Bahá'í endeavours.

However, it should be acknowledged plainly that poverty cannot be alleviated without a just distribution of material wealth among the peoples of the world. In fact, the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh provides a powerful means for fostering the prosperity of humankind. As they observe the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh, which requires them to offer a percentage of their excess wealth, Bahá'ís across the globe understand that, by placing funds at the disposal of the Universal House of Justice, they are facilitating the transfer of material resources in ways that promote the welfare of society. At this point, the amounts available fall far short of the needs of the vast regions of the planet that lack the requisite financial means. Nevertheless, the observance of this law makes it possible for the House of Justice to provide funds to development projects under way in all continents.

Apart from the funds accessible through the institution of Ḥuqúqu'lláh and regular contributions made to other institutions, including those earmarked specifically for social action, efforts in the area of social and economic development can tap into resources available from governments and donor agencies. Yet, irrespective of their sources, in no way do such funds set the agenda for development efforts in the communities that accept assistance. The relationship of dependence so prevalent in the world today, whereby certain regions are beholden to others for access to resources, is unacceptable.

“Social change”, the Universal House of Justice made clear in its Riḍván 2010 message, “is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another”, and in general Bahá'ís from one area do not establish development projects for others. The movement of individuals from community to community, and across borders, does occur however, and here every Bahá'í is guided by the words of Bahá'u'lláh: “Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity.” When Bahá'ís move residence or travel to another place in the context of some work, they form part of the collectivity of their new local communities, and all the others also see them as such. They now come under the guidance of local institutions, which are responsible for facilitating the flow of knowledge and for channelling the energies of every member of their communities; the idea of an expert from outside being allowed to impose his or her professional aspirations on the local population is thus avoided.

In the efforts of Bahá'ís everywhere, then, can be seen the emergence of a global community which, connected through its institutions, is striving to establish a pattern of activity that gives due respect to local autonomy without creating a sense of isolation from the whole, that attaches importance to material means without allowing them to become instruments of control, that provides for the flow of

knowledge without introducing paternalistic attitudes, that strengthens capacity in individuals without any regard for their economic background. While vigorously engaged in activities to improve their immediate surroundings, Bahá'ís feel part of a process of development that is global in scope and influence.

IV. The methodology of Bahá'í social and economic development

In addition to those elements of the conceptual framework that define the nature of Bahá'í development efforts, there are a number of concepts which shed light on the methods to be adopted. That the collective investigation of reality can best be undertaken in an atmosphere which encourages detachment from personal views, that such an ongoing investigation should give due importance to valid empirical information, that mere opinion should not be raised to the status of fact, that conclusions should correspond to the complexity of the issues at hand and not be broken up into a series of simplistic points, that the articulation of observations and conclusions should be presented in precise and dispassionate language, that progress in every area of endeavour is contingent upon the creation of an environment where powers are multiplied and manifest themselves in unified action—general concepts such as these, drawn from both science and religion, inform the specific methodological perspective discussed below.

(i) Reading society and formulating a vision

As mentioned earlier, endeavours in the sphere of social action frequently take the form of modest acts carried out by small groups of individuals residing in a locality. In a sense, these stirrings at the grassroots can be considered responses to readings of social reality, even though they are seldom expressed explicitly as such at that level. For more elaborate endeavours of social and economic development, reading society with higher and higher degrees of accuracy has to become an explicit element of the methodology of learning.

Every development effort can be said to represent a response to some understanding of the nature and state of society, its challenges, the institutions operating in it, the forces influencing it, and the capacities of its peoples. To read society in this way is not to explore every detail of the social reality. Nor does it necessarily involve formal studies. Conditions need to be understood progressively, both from the perspective of a particular endeavour's purpose and in the context of a vision of humanity's collective existence. Indeed, it is vital that the reading of society be consistent with the teachings of the Faith. That the true nature of a human being is spiritual, that every human being is a “mine rich in gems” of limitless potential, that the forces of integration and disintegration each in their own way are propelling humanity towards its destiny are but a few examples of teachings that would shape one's understanding of social reality. Bahá'í-inspired organizations supporting relatively complex lines of action need to continually refine their reading of society, using the methods of science to the best of their abilities.

It is important to note that reading the social reality of a population from within is different than studying it as an outsider. In instances where the population in question is relatively poor in material resources, outsiders with access to greater means frequently see only deprivation—the wealth of talent in the population, the aspirations of its members, and their capacity to arise and become the protagonists of change may all be overlooked. Furthermore, external observers of poverty are all too often unaware of the tendency to allow their own feelings of pity, fear, indignation or ambivalence to affect their reading of society and to base their proposed solutions on the value they place on their own

experiences. However, when an effort is participatory, in the sense that it seeks to involve the people themselves in the generation and application of knowledge, as all forge together a path of progress, dualities such as “outsider-insider” and “knowledgeable-ignorant” quickly disappear.

According to their reading of society, those engaged in social action form and refine a vision of their work within the social space available to them. The word “vision” here does not simply mean a set of goals or a description of an idealized future condition. Particularly when a Bahá’í-inspired organization is involved, a vision has to express a general idea of how goals are to be achieved: the nature of the strategies to be devised, the approaches to be taken, the attitudes to be assumed, and even an outline of some of the methods to be employed. The vision of work articulated by such an organization is never complete; it has to become more and more precise, be able to accommodate constantly evolving and ever more complex action, and attain increasingly high levels of accuracy in its operation.

(ii) Consultation

If learning in action is to be the primary mode of operation in the area of social and economic development, the Bahá’í principle of consultation needs to be fully appreciated. Whether concerned with analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action, consultation may be seen as collective search for truth. Participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved. In this conception of the collective investigation of reality, truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action.

In the context of social action, the principle of consultation is expressed in a variety of forms, each appropriate to the space within which it occurs. Often, when a small group is engaged in an endeavour, every matter of concern is the subject of consultation. Yet, within an organization, the principle will find expression in different ways. What should be noted in this connection is that, at times, consultation is undertaken between those regarded as equals with the aim of reaching a joint decision, as in the case of the deliberations of a Spiritual Assembly. Under other circumstances, it takes the form of a discussion, as may be necessary, to draw out thoughts and information towards the enrichment of common understanding, but with the decision being made by those with authority. It is this latter form that would distinguish the operations of a Bahá’í-inspired organization, where a degree of individual or group authority is given to those on whom responsibility has been conferred.

Clearly, then, not every person within an organization will participate equally in making every decision. Responsibility needs to be appropriately structured and defined. For example, there will be many spaces in which individuals involved in a particular component of the work will have the opportunity to share insights, reach higher levels of understanding, and make certain decisions pertaining to their area of functioning. In the case of an organization with a board and an executive director, they will often take decisions without the need to consult with every member of the organization. But theirs is also the responsibility to create an atmosphere in which relevant information and knowledge flow openly and in which the results of consultation in all the spaces of the organization are conveyed in ways that promote understanding and consensus among its members.

Beyond such considerations, a consultative spirit pervades the interactions of those engaged in social action, of whatever size and complexity, and the population they serve. This does not imply that formal

mechanisms are necessarily in place for this purpose. It suggests, rather, that the aspirations of the people, their observations and ideas, are ever present and are consciously incorporated into plans and programmes.

(iii) Action and reflection on action

At the heart of every development endeavour is consistent, systematic action. Action, however, needs to be accompanied by constant reflection to ensure that it continues to serve the aims of the endeavour. Development strategies that are formulated simply in terms of projects with well-stated goals, followed by evaluation of how and why they were or were not achieved, have limitations. An approach to development defined in terms of learning does, at times, admit formal evaluation. Yet, it depends far more on structured reflection woven into a pattern of action, through which questions can emerge and methods and approaches be adjusted.

Given the multitude of humanity's needs and the enthusiasm with which programmes inspired by the teachings of the Faith are frequently received, it can be tempting for a Bahá'í-inspired organization to try to pursue every opportunity and become engaged in frenetic action. Learning to be systematic and focused is a challenge that all those involved in development efforts, from a small group to the community itself, have to meet.

A notion that has proven useful in this respect is that of a line of action. A line of action is conceived as a sequence of activities, each of which builds on the previous one and prepares the way for the next. Endeavours often begin with a single line of action, but gradually a number of interrelated lines emerge, constituting a whole area of action. For example, to be effective, even an effort at the grassroots focusing solely on the area of child education needs to simultaneously follow such lines of action as the training of teachers and consciousness-raising in the community about education, as well as attending to the teaching-learning experience.

Focused, systematic thinking and persistent, meticulous labour do not, of course, detract from the spirit of service that animates social action. While paying attention to the smallest practical details, one can be occupied with the most profound spiritual matters. A distinguishing feature of any Bahá'í endeavour has to be the emphasis it places on the spirit with which action is undertaken. This requires from the participants purity of motive, rectitude of conduct, humility, selflessness, and respect for human dignity. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

One righteous act is endowed with a potency that can so elevate the dust as to cause it to pass beyond the heaven of heavens. It can tear every bond asunder, and hath the power to restore the force that hath spent itself and vanished.

(iv) Utilizing material means

To accomplish their aims, endeavours in the area of social action require material means. There is a tendency among many organizations in the world—including those working to achieve praiseworthy ends—to measure success principally in terms of the amount of money received and spent. Bahá'í development efforts are expected to set aside such criteria. In modest instances of social action, resources are typically contributed by the community. A more complex endeavour will have to acquire greater capacity to draw upon and utilize funds. In the case of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, this may extend, as mentioned earlier, to receiving grants from donor agencies. Here great care is required to

ensure that, in attempting to secure funds, an organization is not distracted from its primary purpose: capacity building within a given population.

However modest the amounts expended may be, it is vital that a system be put in place to oversee the proper management of finances. The integrity of an endeavour is, of course, secured by the trustworthiness and honesty of its participants. Yet, a proven system of financial management within an organization serves to protect against an atmosphere of carelessness and imprecision that can open the door to temptation.

In addition to a sound financial system, the question of efficiency needs attention. What should be avoided are limited conceptions of efficiency, for instance, those that consider only the relation of output to material input, even when the latter includes some quantitative measure of effort. A more sophisticated understanding of efficiency seems to be required. With regard to input, for example, work that is motivated by a spirit of service and an inner urge to excel clearly has a different value than work that is used as a vehicle to advance one's personal interests. As to results, to give another example, the accomplishment of a particular task—say, the construction of a small facility for a school—may be far less important than the development of the participants' capacity to cooperate and engage in unified action.

There is also a wealth of spiritual and intellectual resources upon which endeavours can draw, whatever the material resources available. A number of these are mentioned in the Bahá'í writings, such as “unrelaxing resolve and harmonious cooperation”, “energy, loyalty and resourcefulness”, “determination”, “spirit of absolute consecration”, “organizing ability”, “zeal”, “tenacity, sagacity and fidelity”, “single-minded devotion”, “absolute dedication”, “perseverance”, “vigour”, “courage”, “audacity”, “consistency”, “tenacity of purpose”, “tenacity of resolution”, and “unrelaxing vigilance”. What the Bahá'í community has so far achieved in the work of expansion and consolidation with limited material means is a testimony to the efficacy of these spiritual resources, which should be increasingly extended to the sphere of social action.

Those involved in social action also need to be constantly aware of the solemn responsibility for the money that has been placed at their disposal. In this connection, it is helpful to keep in mind the attitude Bahá'ís evince in relation to the sacred funds of the Faith—contributions are offered liberally, joyfully, and sacrificially, and institutions observe prudence and a high degree of economy in the expenditure of that money.

V. Guiding principles

Social action, it has been suggested in this paper, is to be carried out in the context of a much larger enterprise—namely, the advancement of a civilization that ensures the material and spiritual prosperity of the entire human race. The fundamental teachings of the Faith that will inspire this civilization, some of which have been mentioned in these pages, need to find expression in the sphere of social action. Clearly, the application of the requisite principles to the social and material progress of communities involves a vast process of learning.

In general, a challenge for any instance of social action is to ensure consistency—among the explicit and implicit convictions which underpin an initiative, the values promoted by it, the attitudes adopted by its participants, the methods they employ, and the ends they seek. Achieving consistency between belief and practice is no small task: a deep-seated recognition of the oneness of humanity should prevent all

efforts from fostering disunity, isolation, separateness or competition; an unshakeable conviction in the nobility of human beings, capable of subduing their lower passions and evincing heavenly qualities, should serve to protect against prejudice and paternalism, both of which violate the dignity of people; an immutable belief in justice should guide an endeavour to allocate resources according to the real needs and aspirations of the community rather than the whims and wishes of a privileged few; the principle of the equality of women and men should open the way not only for women to assume their role as protagonists of development and benefit from its fruits but also for the experience of that half of the world's population to be given more and more emphasis in development thought. These few examples illustrate how closely spiritual principles are to guide development practice.

If contradictions are to be avoided, the participants in an endeavour need to become increasingly aware of the environment within which their work advances. On the one hand, they are to freely draw insights from the range of philosophies, academic theories, community programmes and social movements within that environment and to keep current with the technological trends that influence progress. On the other hand, they should remain watchful lest they allow the teachings to be bent into conformity with this or that ideology, intellectual fad or fashionable practice. In this connection, the capacity to measure the value of prevalent approaches, ideas, attitudes, and methods in the balance of the Faith is vital. This capacity enables one, for example, to uncover the aggrandizement of self so often lying behind initiatives that are nominally concerned with empowerment, to discern the tendency of certain development efforts to foist upon the poor an entirely materialistic worldview, to perceive the subtle ways in which competitiveness and greed can be promoted in the name of justice and prosperity, and ultimately to abandon the notion that one or another theory or movement which may fleetingly acquire some prominence in the wider society can provide a shortcut to meaningful change. The following passage written by the Universal House of Justice provides guidance in this connection:

Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

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“Insights from the Frontiers of Learning”

**A document prepared by
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When the Universal House of Justice at the start of this Five Year Plan called on the Bahá'í world to build on the extraordinary achievements of the previous five years, it described a community that had not only surpassed its numerical goals but had also achieved qualitative progress at the more profound level of culture. Since then, the friends have extended their efforts to an increasing number of clusters, embracing ever-larger contingents of participants in a process of community building. At the close of the Plan's second year, there is already a rich experience that has significant implications for future action. The purpose of the present document is to review this experience and describe a number of approaches that, when applied by the friends in a manner suited to their circumstances, may enable them to accelerate the progress under way. For this review the clusters at the frontiers of learning worldwide will first be considered, then those where the friends are beginning to establish programmes of growth, and finally those where efforts are being made to increase intensity. A few words will also be said about administrative arrangements at the regional or national level that support the movement of clusters.

1. CLUSTERS AT THE FRONTIERS OF LEARNING

Today, in more than 3,600 clusters around the globe, the friends are striving to establish new programmes of growth or to advance existing ones. An analysis of developments in some 200 of the most advanced of these clusters—particularly the strongest 20—suggests effective strategies for growth and demonstrates the efficacy of pursuing lines of action in a coherent manner. The House of Justice has stated this Ríḍván that many of the “distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development”.¹ It is hoped, therefore, that a close examination of the pattern of action characteristic of the clusters at the forefront of learning will assist friends labouring in clusters at even the earliest stages of development. Advanced clusters generally have a sizeable Bahá'í community and, more significantly, have been effective over time in mobilizing large numbers of individuals in service to the Cause and to society. Some have historically had large communities; others have experienced significant growth only in recent years. Yet, in all of the strongest clusters, those sustaining the various activities of the Plan are counted in the hundreds, while participants may number in the thousands. From among these dedicated friends, some, thoroughly conversant with the processes shaping the cluster, attend to the administrative needs of the Plan as cluster coordinators, members of Area Teaching Committees, members of Local Spiritual Assemblies, or assistants to Auxiliary Board members. A growing number serve as teachers of children's classes, animators of junior youth groups, or tutors of study circles, and participate in cluster-wide teaching campaigns. Many also lend their talents to a host of other activities in the teaching and administrative fields and to the enrichment of various aspects of community life.

Everyone is aware that participation in the Nineteen Day Feast and observance of the Holy Days are obligations not to be forgotten, and everyone recognizes the importance of devotional gatherings and the quality of the devotional life of the community. A welcome addition to this efficient use of human resources is the focused attention being given by a nucleus of dedicated friends, usually youth, to intensive efforts in a rising number of neighbourhoods and villages. Among the distinguishing characteristics of these advanced clusters, as the following pages will explain, is the ability of the friends to sustain growth in regular three-month cycles, to maintain focus on the educational process that propels progress, to establish a strong community-building effort, to organize their endeavours to meet the challenge of increasing complexity, and to guide a growing involvement with the wider society.

1.1 A Sustained Rhythm of Expansion and Consolidation

The House of Justice has explained that the pattern of action unfolding in clusters that creates a vibrant community life may be viewed from two, equally valid perspectives. One of these involves “the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified ... ; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan”.² When sustained over time, these three-month cycles of activity set a particular rhythm to community life. Each cycle the friends regularly renew their vision, assess their progress and current challenges, adjust their plans of action, and organize intensive phases of activity for expansion and consolidation. These cycles unfold uninterrupted, even though patterns of expansion may vary. Occasional problems retard progress, but the believers are able to surmount obstacles and move on in unified action. With a deep appreciation of the imperative of direct teaching when circumstances call for it, the friends in strong clusters have moved beyond a single approach to the expansion phase of their cycles. They have overcome a preoccupation to try to increase in numbers in a relatively short period of time. Their understanding of the framework for action having become deeper, their analysis of the complex array of circumstances and forces more sophisticated, and their reflection on their accomplishments and the challenges ahead more penetrating, they are able to make sound strategic choices in order to respond to the requirements of growth at a given moment. “The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a programme of growth to be directed towards the same end”,³ the House of Justice observed at Riḍván 2013. “Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals or collectively; in another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.”⁴ Similarly, plans for the expansion phase might differ according to the needs of a particular neighbourhood or village. Indeed, where resources are plentiful, different groups of individuals may be directed towards different, but complementary objectives in a single expansion phase. In this way, over a span of many cycles, there is a steady increase in the number of new believers, of core activities and participants, and of those who, when accompanied by others, are able to extend the scope and complexity of the work of expansion and consolidation. As the process of learning advances, it is natural that “when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time”.⁵ Yet, the House of Justice adds, “This in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavours.”⁶ The ability to assign resources to new elements introduced in successive messages from the House of Justice, without shifting the attention of all the Plan’s contributors, allows the friends in the most advanced clusters to make progress towards “the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith”.⁷ The result of all these considerations is a three-month period filled with a range of lively, diverse, and well-coordinated

activities. And even though the rate of progress may vary from place to place depending on the circumstances of various populations, the cycle is characterized by a spirit of unity and a sense of common purpose among the friends throughout the entire cluster. What is important to realize is that such a promising pattern of growth can only be maintained if everyone, in a humble posture of learning, and no matter the extent of his or her activity, offers unqualified support, in deeds and words, to every other soul who labours in the divine vineyard. “All must become as wings to bear one another onward”,⁸ Bahá’u’lláh states.

1.2 Emergence of a Well-Grounded Educational Process

The second perspective from which the pattern of action in a cluster can be viewed is as an educational process with three distinct stages, “the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults”.⁹ The most advanced clusters demonstrate both the magnitude that such an endeavour can assume and the complexity it entails. In the Lubumbashi cluster of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, the educational process now serves about 6,000 people, including some 3,500 children, 2,200 junior youth, and hundreds of youth and adults in study circles, all supported by an intricate scheme that generates and systematizes knowledge and coordinates the efforts of scores of tutors, animators, and children’s class teachers. In many parts of the world, it is relatively easy to attract children from the wider society to Bahá’í classes, and parents readily recognize the beneficial influence of spiritual and moral education on the attitudes and behaviour of their youngsters. The challenge now being rigorously addressed by training institutes in the most advanced clusters is to systematize the effort and create an enduring system for the spiritual education of children. The House of Justice observed, “Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children’s class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses.”¹⁰ The immensity of the challenge involved in achieving this is recognized. Not only are courses being held to train teachers for the first three grades of the programme for which materials currently exist but a network of coordinators and their helpers is also gradually being established in each cluster to accompany the teachers, so that they can learn to sustain the classes and help the children to advance from grade to grade each year. In India, for example, as soon as the materials for Grades 2 and 3 were released in 2011, the 17 regional institutes organized a series of training seminars, efforts were intensified to translate the materials into Hindi and other regional languages, and regional and cluster coordinators, in consultation with cluster agencies, identified and trained teachers in the new materials. Initial results were encouraging, with nearly 3,000 children moving into Grade 2, and several hundred into Grade 3. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme has grown to become an increasingly prominent feature of many advanced clusters in the world. With the help of a network of more than 40 clusters designated as sites for the dissemination of learning about the programme guided by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Centre, a number of practical challenges have been overcome so that the programme can be implemented and sustained. Valuable knowledge has been accumulated that has allowed the friends in the learning sites and associated clusters to enhance the efficacy of training and support for animators, to maintain an increasing number of junior youth groups for the requisite three years, to obtain the support of parents and officials, and to carry out the programme in the context of the overall pattern of cluster activities. The arrangement for the ongoing dissemination of learning has made it possible in the advanced clusters to raise the number of participants to hundreds and in a few cases to more than a thousand. By instilling in the junior youth a keen sense of purpose, the programme has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to transform young people, increase their

commitment to spiritual and material education, empower them to undertake social action for the improvement of their communities, resist the destructive and prejudicial forces within their societies, and contribute to the construction of a better world. The two stages of the educational process described above are only possible, of course, if there is a movement of individuals through the sequence of courses of the institute, and the most advanced clusters have sustained a continual flow of participants over an extended period of time—some for as many as 20 to 30 cycles. Over the years, various approaches have contributed to this accomplishment worldwide. To initiate the institute process, believers were encouraged to participate in the courses and then, as they engaged others in conversation about the message of Bahá'u'lláh, they found receptivity among friends, family members, neighbours, and co-workers, many of whom readily participated in study circles. Subsequently, the believers in many clusters learned to reach out to “segments of the general population with heightened receptivity”¹¹ through direct teaching efforts involving home visits or campaigns, resulting in significant numbers of new Bahá'ís. As increasing attention was given to the youth in these populations, a significant percentage began to enter into study circles. In the most advanced clusters, the capacity to harness the ready response of growing numbers of young people by enabling them to move quickly into the field of action primarily as animators of junior youth groups, but also as participants in or initiators of other core activities, is on the rise. The challenge of increasing the number of tutors who take advantage of this opportunity is being actively pursued as well. Experience with youth from receptive populations in advanced clusters suggests that the expansion of the junior youth programme has the potential to impart a pronounced boost to all three stages of the educational process. The effort to train animators of junior youth groups, more and more from among youth in the larger society, calls for additional study circles or institute campaigns. Such campaigns could take the form of an intensive study of Ruhi Institute Books 1 and 5, leading to the immediate establishment of several junior youth groups; over time the majority of animators participate in study circles to complete the remaining books of the sequence, which enhance their abilities for service. As awareness is raised among the families of the junior youth, other members, mostly children and youth but also a few adults, become involved in the stage of the educational process appropriate for them. Indeed, many insights about how to significantly broaden the programme to involve large numbers of participants have been derived from experience in those clusters supported by learning sites. These insights have been shared with regional institutes and applied in a manner that assisted with the implementation of other core activities. Finally, in those clusters where the friends have learned to maintain junior youth groups over a number of years until the completion of the programme, many junior youth show enthusiasm for the courses of the main sequence and, with their customary zeal and discipline, engage in study and in carrying out the necessary acts of service. Such a promising outcome, though yet modest in its extent, suggests that, as they move through the sequence of courses, these young people could swell the ranks of children's class teachers, animators, and tutors in a cluster. What has been described here is not the only way the educational process advances. However, time and again, the junior youth programme has proved its effectiveness as a strategy that merits vigorous pursuit.

1.3 Advances in Community Building

When human resources in a cluster become more abundant, core activities multiply and participation grows. A dynamic and complex pattern of action emerges that touches every aspect of community life. An evident characteristic of the advanced clusters is a change in understanding that moves beyond concern with the mere multiplication of activities to manifest the deeper implications of the community-building process. In its Riḍván 2013 message, the House of Justice states: As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate

pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavours. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives.... .. Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all.¹²

The mutually reinforcing character of the core activities and the transformative impact of the institute process become more evident, and sustainable growth and universal participation more feasible, in the smaller, intimate settings of villages and neighbourhoods. As the House of Justice explains: In essence, this approach centres on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.¹³ Of course, not all neighbourhoods demonstrate the receptivity necessary to become centres of intense activity, but Bahá'ís, wherever they live, can reach out to others and establish core activities, drawing participants from among their acquaintances wherever they may reside in the cluster. In recognizing the commonalities between two simultaneous thrusts—one deeper in concentrated areas and the other more broadly across the cluster—the friends in the advanced clusters readily appreciate their engagement in a single collective enterprise of community building. A unity in diversity of actions emerges, in which every believer can find a part to play as defined within the Plan's framework for action. And even though different individuals engage in different activities, all share a common purpose and readily appreciate the contribution made by others as they gradually embrace larger and larger numbers of participants in the pattern of their community life.

1.4 An Effective Organizational Scheme

A cluster advances as more and more capacity for service is developed in a growing number of individuals, who are then assisted to initiate a growing number of interdependent activities that

embrace ever-larger numbers of participants. This capacity-building process must, as time goes on, be complemented by an ever more sophisticated system of coordination and support. The House of Justice explained: “Sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity.”¹⁴ Numerical growth, along with the geographic spread of activities in neighbourhoods and across the cluster, has necessitated further development of the basic scheme of coordination used to initially establish an intensive programme of growth. The experience of the advanced clusters has borne testimony to the words of the House of Justice that “the workings of this cluster-level system ... has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities”.¹⁵ While it is not possible to distil from the diverse nascent efforts now emerging in advanced clusters worldwide a single approach for general use, at this point at least three dimensions are noteworthy. In the most advanced clusters, because of increasing complexity, it has become necessary to subdivide the cluster into smaller areas as well as to select neighbourhoods or villages for a focused effort to learn about community building. Large urban centres under the jurisdiction of one Local Spiritual Assembly are organized into sectors, while rural and urban clusters with several Local Assemblies are divided by creating a number of units. Examples of such units are the five routes of the Norte del Cauca cluster in Colombia that follow particular bus routes and three areas of Tiriki West in Kenya that resulted from grouping the 72 communities into segments of 20 to 25 neighbouring villages. With regard to neighbourhoods and villages, deciding what constitutes a small setting has not been easy in all cases. In the sparsely populated Pemba cluster in Zambia, a few small villages next to each other were grouped together to form settings large enough for learning. Conversely, in the Kajang cluster in Malaysia, the friends started by working in large municipal areas but gradually identified within them smaller locations more suited to community-building endeavours. The designation of multiple units within a cluster allows for the creation of new patterns of coordination to serve the friends in smaller areas. The number of individuals involved in coordination and support depends largely on the growth in participation in these smaller settings. At a minimum, in the most advanced clusters a trio of coordinators is appointed, one for each of the three defined areas of action of the institute. As various subunits are identified, the more experienced friends may be asked to serve as additional institute coordinators or as helpers to coordinators. In some instances it has been found useful to have a sector teaching or growth committee emerge in a similar way, with the designation of an individual as a sector growth facilitator functioning under the aegis of the Area Teaching Committee. Even down to the level of neighbourhoods some informal structures are beginning to take shape, such as a core group that consults, plans, and fosters participation. Where there are a large number of activities, coordinators and growth facilitators are often needed to serve full-time as part of a more formal scheme of coordination. In any case, what is emerging in most clusters in the front ranks is a robust administrative network involving numbers of coordinators and helpers assigned to assist them, currently ranging from about 10 overall in clusters such as Toronto, Canada, to as many as 50 or 60 in Lubumbashi and Tiriki West. In Delhi City, India, the structures in the Harkesh Nagar neighbourhood alone involve 26 individuals who support about 200 core activities engaging nearly 1,200 people. Another vital and promising development is the increasing participation of Local Spiritual Assemblies. Aware of the guidance provided in the 28 December 2010 message from the House of Justice pertaining to their responsibilities, and enriched by “each member’s personal involvement in the core activities”,¹⁶ Local Assemblies are periodically examining their contribution to the overall effort. Representatives of Assemblies often participate regularly in cluster planning meetings and share with other members the ways in which their Assembly can support the cycles of activity. Assemblies are also able to think about all community members, providing encouragement

and support and ensuring that each finds a meaningful part in the work of expansion and consolidation.

1.5 Greater Involvement in the Life of Society

As the friends in advanced clusters interact more closely with families and form veritable friendships, they have found themselves drawn further and further into the life of society. Their efforts, which emerge naturally through conversation and common concerns, generally consist of “two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity”:¹⁷ participating in the prevalent discourses of society and social action. In both cases, the first steps consist of simple, fairly informal acts; some may eventually evolve into more complex, ongoing endeavours. The initial impact made by the friends in their villages and neighbourhoods is often on perceptions and values related to the spiritual, moral, and material education of children and youth. As the quality of the children’s classes and junior youth groups has risen, the capacity of the believers to have meaningful conversations on the subjects of education and the moral empowerment of young people has also advanced. As a corollary to this, parents with youngsters participating in the Bahá’í programmes have demonstrated a greater appreciation of the importance and commitment to the progress of the academic studies of their children. Warm friendships and ongoing conversations among the families in neighbourhoods and villages have also led to greater awareness of local needs. Reflection meetings, junior youth groups, or neighbourhood Nineteen Day Feasts provide spaces for the community to begin to consider how to apply the teachings of the Faith “to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly”.¹⁸ Some efforts have begun on a small scale and are developing organically, implemented by villagers or neighbourhood residents themselves. In the Tanna cluster, Vanuatu, for example, a group of junior youth realized that the route across a creek leading to a major intersection was difficult to traverse, particularly for the elderly, so they built a simple bridge and a small basic rest house, where travellers walking long distances could rest or take refuge during a heavy rain. Another feature increasingly observed in advanced clusters is the impact the institute process has had in building the capacity and raising the participation of women, who now are often at the forefront of the teaching and administrative work. Women and girls have gained increased confidence by initiating core activities and are having a greater voice in community affairs through participation in reflection meetings and other gatherings. Parents, impressed by the initiative of their daughters in serving as children’s class teachers, animators of junior youth groups, or tutors of study circles, have come to understand the importance of providing girls an education equal to that of boys. And in cultures that have held traditional views that obstruct the advancement of women, young men as well as young women are becoming thoughtful protagonists of change. In the Daga cluster, Papua New Guinea, for example, young women, normally relegated to household chores and child care, are not only being elected members of Local Assemblies but also as Secretary or Chairperson, a development unimaginable even a few years ago. In addition to these grass-roots stirrings, in certain clusters the efforts of the friends are reinforced through social and economic development activities of Bahá’í-inspired agencies. For example, in the Katuyola village of the Mwinilunga East cluster in Zambia, youth participating in the Preparation for Social Action programme offered by the Inshindo Foundation, together with youngsters from several junior youth groups, initiated a tree-planting project to address the high levels of deforestation that had resulted from traditional slash and burn farming methods. This enterprise grew to engage the people of the village and is receiving the support of the local chief, civic authorities, and the forestry department of the government.

2. EMERGING PROGRAMMES OF GROWTH

In its 28 December message, the Universal House of Justice states that the first milestone, signifying the emergence of a programme of growth, is marked by an initial flow of human resources into the field of action: 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.¹⁹ A new programme of growth begins as two nascent capacities develop. First, one or more friends in a cluster must be able to help individuals study the institute's sequence of courses and accompany them as they initiate core activities. Then, these individuals must be able to attract others to participate in the core activities. As efforts along these lines have borne fruit in various parts of the world, the institutions concerned set aside exaggerated expectations of what must be achieved before a new programme of growth can be said to have emerged. Currently the friends in some 1,200 clusters are working to move beyond this first of several milestones in their development, and such efforts must extend to yet another 1,500 to 2,000 clusters in the next three years to achieve the goal of 5,000 set by the House of Justice.

2.1 Establishing a Basis for Building Capacity

In whatever cluster they reside, whether selected as a goal to receive systematic attention or not, the friends should feel no hesitation to initiate their own effort to establish a programme of growth. Even if the work begins modestly with the actions of a few enthusiastic believers in a single neighbourhood or village, over time, through a sound institute process, an initial spark can grow into a flame that draws more and more individuals into a unified endeavour. Beyond such initiatives, a number of simple but effective strategies have emerged to support local believers or open virgin areas.

Pioneering The House of Justice referred to one of the strategies for initiating a programme of growth in its 23 May 2011 message to the Bahá'ís of the world. In the next five years, the successful prosecution of the Plan will require the services of several thousand consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns, and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programmes of growth.²⁰ Hundreds of believers have already responded to the call to settle in international and homefront goal clusters and to initiate efforts that give rise to an organic process of growth. In general, many of these have been young people—with experience as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, and teachers of children's classes—who had learned how to engage naturally with the wider society in their more advanced home clusters. A majority arose as short-term pioneers, and because they often were able to serve full-time for one or two years, progress in growth and community development proceeded at a rapid pace.

Visiting Teams In describing how a programme of growth emerges, the House of Justice stated that “visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities”.²¹ Where the institutions found it challenging to raise up pioneers at the start, or where pioneers and local believers could benefit from added support, an individual, sometimes an assistant assigned by an Auxiliary Board member, or teaching teams composed of believers who had solid experience and a collaborative attitude were sent to goal clusters to help firmly establish the institute process. This support was often reinforced by arranging for friends from clusters without growth programmes to spend time in a well-developed cluster to increase their understanding through first-hand experience of how to advance a process of growth. In the island cluster of Rodrigues, off the coast of Mauritius, many attempts were made to settle short-term homefront pioneers, but whenever they eventually left the island, the growth

process invariably stalled. A team of four experienced animators from the mainland came for three weeks with a plan to establish junior youth groups and develop resources within the population. The first week, assisted by two local animators, they reached out to 20 junior youth and visited the parents to explain the programme. In the second week, they organized a one week day camp; 15 junior youth attended consistently. In the third week, the animators continued to visit the parents to assess the impact of the programme. The younger children asked to have activities as well. From the group of junior youth now involved in the programme, three will turn 15 soon and hope to participate in a study circle for Book 1. For their next visit, the team from Mauritius decided to arrange for the study of Book 5 as well as to assist with the junior youth groups.

Institutional Support At the start of the Five Year Plan, national communities were encouraged to select, after consultation among the various institutions concerned, a limited number of clusters where they could begin to learn about initiating new programmes of growth. Many countries, buoyed by their experience and initial success, already have a process in place to begin work in all the clusters they hope to advance beyond the first milestone before the end of this Plan. Others still need to extend their efforts in this area during the course of the coming year, so that there is sufficient time for the institute process to take root and begin to flourish in every goal cluster. “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”²², the House of Justice states. Whatever strategy is employed to achieve this end, institutional support is essential. A homefront pioneer who settled in the Fianarantsoa cluster of Madagascar found great receptivity. She began by hosting devotional meetings and offering a children’s class. She was able to engage a few parents of the children in a study circle, but for some time the cluster did not advance further. Assistance from the training institute made the difference. When the regional coordinator visited, together they were able to stimulate the growth process by identifying youth who showed interest in serving as animators of junior youth groups. They made a concerted effort to meet youth and their families, share the aims of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and enlist their support. These youth studied the courses of the institute in a nearby urban centre and embraced the Faith. There are now nine junior youth groups of 100 participants. With the local friends actively serving, the cluster moved past the first milestone in a span of only nine months.

2.2 Expanding the Reach of Core Activities

In new clusters where efforts to establish programmes of growth have been initiated over the past two years, the friends have taken advantage of “opportunities afforded by [their] personal circumstances”²³ and engaged in conversation with people they come in contact with in daily life—neighbours, parents from their children’s school, shopkeepers, young students, or new acquaintances met in public spaces—about the spiritual and material conditions of their communities. The stories of these myriad encounters have confirmed the observation of the House of Justice that the believers are growing in their capacity “to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life”²⁴ and that any of the core activities “can serve as a stimulus to growth”.²⁵ A mother in Belarus began a children’s class with her two children, and the class grew to nine. Young people aged 12 to 14 soon showed interest, and the mother and her husband participated in intensive courses of the training institute to learn how to serve as animators of a junior youth group. After this second core activity got under way, a study circle was added to respond to the growing interest of the children’s parents. In a cluster in the United States, a devotional meeting provided an initial impulse for movement. Gradually a study circle was formed with some of the participants from the devotional

gathering. Soon after, a children's class was started, followed by a junior youth group. In an emerging cluster in Fiji, the first step was to reach out to youth and invite them to serve as animators to form and sustain junior youth groups. To support the initiative, the Local Spiritual Assembly decided that all its members would also complete a study of Book 5. The initial effort attracted the interest and involvement of youth from the wider society, and as they participated in institute courses, human resources were developed not only to multiply junior youth groups but also to establish children's classes as well. These experiences, repeated in various ways in many clusters worldwide, demonstrate how the initial flow of human resources into the arena of systematic action rapidly propels a cluster beyond the first milestone along the continuum of development.

3. INCREASING INTENSITY

As the reach of core activities continues to expand, a higher level of organization to coordinate efforts emerges, and a distinct rhythm to the cycles of expansion and consolidation becomes apparent. The enthusiasm of the friends grows, their facility with the instruments and methods of the Plan increases, and they become more adept at responding to the unique social conditions around them. With more activity, they put in place the institutional structures needed to channel their energies and deal with added complexity. In time, they advance towards the second milestone, the establishment of an intensive programme of growth. While a good deal of effort may be required to move beyond the first milestone, this is only the beginning of many challenges to be addressed in striving to continually increase the intensity of action and sustain the process of growth and community development. Indeed, in some cases, the friends have encountered misunderstandings or obstacles that have sapped their energies or led to a reduction in the scope of their endeavours for some time. With experience they have come to realize that overcoming challenges is an intrinsic part of their journey. Thus, in striving to increase intensity so that clusters advance along the continuum of development, the challenge of the institutions becomes, on the one hand, how to sustain and extend the healthy dynamics of fledgling programmes of growth and, on the other, how to revitalize intensive programmes of growth in clusters where the level of activity and the development of human resources seem to have reached a plateau. In this regard, a number of insights and approaches have emerged to assist the friends to “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”.²⁶

3.1 Enhancing the Quality of the Institute Process

In its Riḍván 2010 message and in the message dated 12 December 2011, the House of Justice discussed the purpose and character of the institute process and the importance of enhancing its quality. Through a deep study of these messages, the believers and institutions have realized that creating a systematic and vibrant process of human resource development continues to be their primary challenge. They recognize that “in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress”.²⁷ Replacing an anxiety about “numbers”—whether of core activities, participants, or enrolments—with confidence in the efficacy of the institute process to empower growing contingents of individuals, the friends are placing renewed emphasis on the quality of the educational process at all levels, and especially the quality of study circles. As the House of Justice wrote at Riḍván 2010, “Much will fall on those who serve as tutors.”²⁸ Theirs is the responsibility to create an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation.²⁹ With the aim of enhancing the capacities of those serving as tutors, animators, and

children's class teachers, training institutes around the world have given greater attention to reinforcing the work of cluster institute coordinators on whom rests primary responsibility for accompanying them. In the past two years, special arrangements were made to enable more coordinators to offer additional time—many on a full-time basis. Also, gatherings for cluster coordinators that involved in-depth study of institute materials and reflection on critical concepts contained in them, in conjunction with field visits, were held in many regions and countries. In this way, institute coordinators increased their ability to support the friends in conducting study of the materials of the institute in a manner that fosters understanding and in implementing the practical components in a way that builds confidence for service. Where this type of profound reflection was incorporated into the structure of training institutes and their regular operations, qualitative progress was observed.

3.2 Providing Greater Structure as Complexity Rises

In clusters that have attained a level of development where “a nascent programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived”,³⁰ the need for administrative structure emerges over time in a natural way and cannot be rushed to correspond to some preconceived scheme. Initially the efforts of the friends have generally been guided and supported by Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. More sophisticated patterns of coordination are required as the number of participants and the level of activity increase. If one of the core activities is growing far beyond the level of the others, it is natural that a coordinator would be put in place for this line of action first. For example, in those clusters where focus was initially directed towards increasing the number of junior youth groups, the junior youth coordinator was the first to be appointed. “Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process,”³¹ explains the House of Justice, “other administrative structures are gradually taking shape.”³² The question of the timely appearance of an Area Teaching Committee depends on the circumstances in a particular cluster. In clusters that are just beyond the first milestone, although the number of activities and human resources might be increasing, the appointment of an individual as a cluster development facilitator has usually proved to be sufficient to support the participation of believers and friends of the Faith in home visits, devotional meetings, and other teaching activities. A nucleus for an Area Teaching Committee has generally emerged naturally from among the core of active believers who have demonstrated a capacity to accompany others in service. As with other structures in the cluster, the means for planning and reflection has also developed organically, becoming more organized, systematic, and varied as complexity has grown. Initial informal interactions, perhaps facilitated by an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant, eventually give rise to a cluster reflection meeting and to other formal and informal occasions for reflection, such as gatherings for coordinators, tutors, animators, or children's class teachers; teaching teams; or for the participants working in specific cluster sectors, neighbourhoods, or villages.

3.3 Intensifying Community-Building Efforts in Neighbourhoods and Villages

In most clusters, there are a number of Bahá'í communities. Community-building efforts will therefore naturally emerge in all these localities. Participants in core activities are drawn from a wide circle of contacts and possibly from various parts of a cluster. Where the number of believers is few, a special measure of flexibility may be required and friends who live in nearby communities may need to collaborate in their endeavours. In sizeable communities, gatherings in a local centre provide an opportunity to host large numbers and demonstrate the distinctive spirit of the Faith, reinforcing the work in smaller settings. Efforts to engage circles of friends in the core activities—university students or young mothers, to mention but two— make a valuable contribution to the overall community-building

process under way. As the friends strive to creatively explore the possibilities around them in more and more parts of the cluster, new believers are welcomed, human resources raised up, and the pattern of community life that germinates through the core activities is gradually extended until it embraces all the believers and their associates. Essential as these efforts are, they eventually reach their own natural pace and scale, and alone, seem insufficient to achieve the thrust required for large-scale expansion and consolidation. As discussed in section 1.3, particularly promising developments occur when, as the House of Justice explains, some of the friends, often young believers, “become integrated into neighbourhoods and dedicate themselves to assisting particularly receptive populations to advance along a path of spiritual development—giving rise to centres of intense activity”.³³ This type of endeavour, a distinguishing feature of the most advanced clusters, offers great promise as well for all clusters where the friends seek to build intensity. In some cases, work in the neighbourhoods or villages is initiated as a result of organized, direct teaching activities or a campaign to expand a particular core activity; in others, individuals settle as pioneers for this purpose; and in some, cluster agencies accompany resident believers to further intensify their teaching efforts among their neighbours. In clusters where, from the outset, the junior youth programme is singled out as a critical element in advancing the community-building process, agencies identify neighbourhoods with a large number of youth and junior youth. In selecting neighbourhoods or villages for focused efforts, it has been observed that fostering activity in too many areas at once can dissipate energies. These varied experiences suggest the importance of the friends’ taking an in-depth view of a particular neighbourhood or village to understand its reality—its resources, its challenges, and the potential of its population to work alongside the Bahá’ís to “begin a process of collective transformation”.³⁴ When a dedicated team of believers focuses its attention on fostering activity in a neighbourhood or village, these friends need to be given latitude to function in a manner that is in harmony with an unfolding organic process and be provided with appropriate support from institutions. They need time to learn how to respond to the demands of growth within a receptive population: how to form genuine friendships, what teaching activities are effective, and how to channel resources to sustain such a growth process. It is not necessary, or even productive, for everyone in the cluster to focus on the neighbourhood. Yet, often it has been found that progress in a neighbourhood or village can infuse a new energy and optimism in endeavours across the rest of the cluster, providing a fresh impulse to its forward movement and to the process of community building under way in all areas. As multiple activities are concentrated in the small, relatively cohesive areas of a neighbourhood or village, the transformative impact of the spiritual and social forces at work are more readily noticed by the population at large. Parents see their children and youth progressing before their eyes and recognize that the social relations of their community have been imbued with a new spirit. Entire families are sometimes drawn to participate in the life of the Bahá’í community and embrace its teachings. And efforts are eventually “sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighbourhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings”.³⁵

3.4 Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles to Sustained Progress

In hundreds of advanced clusters where intensive programmes of growth were begun in the previous Plan, the believers achieved steady progress, enabling them to move beyond the second milestone towards the frontiers of learning. However, in hundreds of others, the friends encountered obstacles that significantly hindered their continued advance or even resulted in a decrease in participation and activity, requiring them to reflect upon and revise their approach in order to learn to overcome the difficulty. A review of some challenges and misconceptions that arose in such clusters may assist those who face similar problems to properly assess their situation and make the necessary adjustments in a

timely manner. In some cases, challenges arose as a result of an inability to establish one or another vital aspect of the framework for action. For example, in certain clusters the institute process had not taken root so the relationship between study and service intrinsic to the institute courses was not realized. Thus, rather than bringing about an organic process in which more and more individuals carry out more and more activities, a small number of believers became overwhelmed by increasing responsibilities. Only when the challenge of human resource development was resolved could the scope of endeavours expand. In other clusters, the friends readily enrolled new believers but struggled to help a significant number of them advance through the sequence of courses and enter a path of service. There were also those instances when the friends initiated many core activities among themselves, without giving due attention to teaching and inviting participants from the wider community. Reflection meetings sometimes centred too much on planning or instruction rather than the opportunity to learn from experience and revise action accordingly. Occasionally, when addressing new, emerging facets of an evolving programme of growth, misunderstandings surfaced, or, in some cases, attention to a new aspect of the work led, inadvertently, to ignoring others. For example, in some places a dichotomy was perceived between collective teaching campaigns and the responsibility for personal teaching, when in reality, every act of teaching represents a response of the community to the Master's Divine Plan. Sometimes, a focus on neighbourhoods was interpreted to mean that core activities drawing participants from different parts of a cluster should no longer be maintained. On occasion, there was a "tendency to confuse focus with uniformity or exclusivity",³⁶ leading either to an insistence on a single fixed approach or, conversely, to the idea that all individuals can establish any initiative they wish. In the work of expansion and consolidation, the House of Justice has repeatedly observed that mistakes will inevitably be made and new challenges will present themselves. Obstacles, when they arise, are ultimately resolved through perseverance and further experience. Fruitless debate, insistence on personal views, creating false dichotomies, or the "tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction"³⁷ can be carefully avoided or wisely overcome. It is learning together that is yielding the insights necessary so that "stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress".³⁸

3.5 Reaching Out to Youth in Receptive Populations

As discussed in section 1.2, the experience generated in many of the most advanced clusters has demonstrated the efficacy of a strategy that involves focused attention on enlisting young people from the wider society to serve in the community-building process. The same approach has been effective in establishing or strengthening intensive programmes of growth. As stated in a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice: By multiplying vibrant junior youth groups, a community learns a great deal about, for instance, how capable human resources are increased and deployed; how capacity for service is raised within cohorts of individuals; how an expanding programme can be effectively coordinated; and how initiating one activity can, quite naturally, lead to the emergence of others. And as a consequence of the organic unfoldment of the educational process and the participants' ongoing spiritual and moral development, all facets of the growth programme are, in time, extended and enhanced.³⁹ In the Tuscany North-West cluster of Italy, the level of activity had reached a plateau and the veteran believers found it challenging to reach out to receptive youth. With the aid of the junior youth coordinator and teaching committee, a campaign focused on expanding the junior youth programme in neighbourhoods in the city of Livorno where the believers were interacting with a receptive population. Ten youths from around Italy spent three weeks in Livorno praying, studying, and preparing how to converse about the junior youth programme. As a result of the campaign, 12 young people from the wider society participated in a two-week intensive training in Books 1 and 5 to

prepare to serve as animators. The experience of focusing on this particular age group in a receptive neighbourhood changed the outlook of a community that had been struggling to increase participation in core activities. As two adult believers wrote, “We all feel that Livorno is no longer as before. There is a new awareness in the community, a new energy, a new vision.” Almost every member of the local community is now engaged in the activities of the Plan, including some serving on a new Area Teaching Committee, others offering devotions in their homes for the new believers and seekers, and nearly all striving to reach out to youth. Similar experiences have emerged in all continents. Not all the believers, of course, are able to work directly with junior youth groups, which may be largely concentrated in certain neighbourhoods or villages in their cluster. Nevertheless, a sound knowledge of the programme has proved to be invaluable for all those engaged in the work of the Plan, since the insights acquired help to shape the discourse with the wider community about the mission of the Faith to contribute to the betterment of the world. In the East Valley cluster in the United States, the friends serving in teaching teams and as animators concentrated for a period on learning how to effectively engage young people and their families from a receptive neighbourhood in an elevated and effective conversation about the junior youth programme. Over time, as their efforts bore fruit, this conversation began to spread to all the friends engaged in activities throughout the cluster, whether associated with the junior youth groups or not. This not only contributed to the multiplication of groups but also enriched the entire programme of growth by helping the friends visualize and describe their efforts in broader terms of community building and social transformation.

3.6 Enduring Fellowship

The “ethos of loving service”⁴⁰ fostered through the institute process becomes the animating spirit in clusters where encouragement and helpfulness are expressed through a deep commitment to accompanying one another in treading a path of service. This vital element in the emerging Bahá’í culture is manifested through the quality of the interactions among the friends. By working shoulder to shoulder, sharing in one another’s joys and struggles, bonds of love and friendship are created that are the foundation for enduring fellowship. No structures or processes can make up for the spirit of loving fellowship if it does not exist. Where faith in the capacity of others, a humble attitude of learning, mutual support and assistance, patience and forbearance, flexibility and generosity, and loving fellowship and encouragement are found, all the elements of the framework for action cohere and progress. As described by the House of Justice: “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.”⁴¹

4. ENHANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT OF CLUSTERS

The previous discussion in sections 1.4 and 3.2 concerning administrative arrangements highlighted how structures within clusters evolve in response to growth and an expanding framework of activity, accommodating ever greater complexity. This section will consider structures and processes at regional and national levels, where institutions are striving “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”⁴² It should be noted that, despite significant evolution in the scheme of coordination in the first two years of the current Plan, it is premature to define a specific pattern to be followed everywhere as clusters move towards the frontiers of learning. More experience is required, and additional guidance must be provided over time by the Universal House of Justice. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the

insights about administrative structures and processes offered in this section of the document, although preliminary in nature, will assist institutions in various countries and regions to keep pace with the complexity associated with the movement of increasing numbers of clusters along the continuum of development.

4.1 Training Institutes

There are some 300 training institutes worldwide, about a third of which operate at the regional level. Some of these agencies have already grown to become sizeable and complex organizations, with scores of full- and part-time coordinators and their helpers maintaining hundreds of activities involving thousands of participants. For many years, most of the work of the institute, including overseeing both administrative matters and the development of the programmes, fell on national or regional coordinators. While the responsibilities of these coordinators continue to be important, and indeed have only become more complex as the scope of the activity of institutes has been extended to thousands of additional clusters, it has been necessary to bring institute boards more fully into operation as well. National Assemblies or Regional Councils, in consultation with Counsellors, appoint to institute boards individuals who have had direct involvement in serving as tutors, animators, children's class teachers, or former coordinators and are familiar with the institute's structure. A sound understanding of the relationship between human resource development and sustained growth is also required. With such a reservoir of experience, boards are increasingly taking responsibility for formulating annual plans and budgets, organizing periodic reflection gatherings with coordinators, facilitating the flow of funds, and collaborating with other institutions. The board also needs to regularly engage with the Counsellors and their auxiliaries and have a close, collaborative relationship with the Regional Council or, in its absence, with the National Assembly itself, through frequent communication and occasional joint meetings. A primary consideration of the board and all the institutions that support the institute is the scheme of coordination and how the coordinators at all levels can be accompanied in their service. National and regional coordinators support a growing number of cluster coordinators by periodically bringing them together in gatherings for sharing experience and by visiting them in the field to support their day-to-day operations. They also ensure that resources such as funds and materials reach clusters in a timely manner, and cluster coordinators are engaged in a collaborative interaction with other agencies and institutions. Where activity is under way in a significant number of clusters, it may even be necessary to provide for the organization of the work of coordinators into subregions. Whatever the particular structure suited to the conditions of a region, there must be a variety of occasions that bring together friends serving as coordinators to learn from one another's experience, explore new guidance, and reflect upon and revise their plans of action. A number of attitudes and abilities are essential to foster in coordinators at all levels: deep understanding and appreciation of the nature, purpose, and methods of the training institute; commitment to the community-building process; recognition of the need to nurture the potential of others; dedication to learning; a collaborative spirit; and a readiness to support others and be supported by them in adhering to a Bahá'í way of life. Experience in recent years clearly indicates that coordinators will need to be allowed to serve for a few years in order for the required capacity to be built, and creative means will have to be developed to enable them to devote a period of their lives to this field of endeavour, perhaps, in the case of the youth, in conjunction with their continuing education.

4.2 Learning Sites for the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Programme

As described earlier, the systematic process for learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme has lent impetus to growth and community building in general. A formal structure for this learning process emerged during the previous Five Year Plan when a number of clusters with significant advances in the implementation of the junior youth programme were designated as sites for the dissemination of learning. Now numbering more than forty, at different stages of development, these learning sites and the resource persons associated with them support a network of approximately ten clusters each. Among these nearly 400 clusters are virtually all of the most advanced clusters in the world. Now a critical component of the institutional framework to advance community building, this structure for systematic learning is proving to be an invaluable resource for Counsellors and their auxiliaries, National Assemblies, Regional Councils, and training institutes. The House of Justice explained: The areas of learning at these sites, and in their associated clusters, have included the capacity of animators, the dynamics of junior youth groups, and the scheme of coordination that supports the development of the programme among diverse populations; this learning is then shared with the training institutes. The effectiveness of the programme is vastly enhanced as resource persons serving the learning sites conduct training seminars and work closely with cluster coordinators in their efforts to increase the number of animators and junior youth groups.⁴³

4.3 Regional Bahá'í Councils

Bearing the primary responsibility at this time “for overseeing the execution of the Five Year Plan in the territories under their jurisdiction,”⁴⁴ Regional Councils recognize that their overarching task is to ensure the movement of clusters along a rich and dynamic continuum of development, from supporting those where the first stirrings of the growth process are evident to strengthening those that are advancing the frontiers of learning. This is achieved through the Councils’ assistance to the institutions, agencies, and believers at the cluster level, in addition to their work with the training institute. As part of their responsibility, Regional Councils ensure “the timely appearance and dynamic functioning of Area Teaching Committees”.⁴⁵ During the last Five Year Plan, Councils gained a great deal of experience in fostering the effective functioning of Area Teaching Committees through gatherings for orientation, consultation, and planning, as well as visits by the Council Secretary or other friends designated to follow the work of the Committees and the progress of clusters. In addition to assessing the strengths and challenges in each cluster, the objective of these interactions was to focus on building capacity in the Committees, particularly in their secretaries. Another fruitful practice has been a periodic meeting for reflection by key individuals at the regional level, once every three or six months, to assess how the Area Teaching Committees are being supported and how they are contributing to the development of the clusters. Such meetings have included the Secretary of the Council, the Counsellor or Auxiliary Board members, regional institute coordinators, and other members of the Council or staff charged with following the movement of clusters. Along with their responsibilities in the field, Regional Councils are carrying out an array of administrative duties. They are trying to put into place efficient systems and mechanisms to ensure the flow of funds, information, learning, and human resources, such as pioneers. The scope of the work of Council Secretaries, which includes overseeing administrative and field operations and, in some cases, properties, is increasing, requiring many to devote hours equivalent to full-time service. In order to manage the wide range of tasks, well-functioning offices with support staff are emerging.

5. SOCIETY-BUILDING POWER OF THE FAITH

Over many decades, generations of Bahá'ís have striven to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to their individual and collective lives. Inspired always by the distant vision of a new World Order and a divine civilization, the believers have pressed on and consecrated themselves to achieving the goals of successive global Plans. This vision of a world civilization, as Shoghi Effendi wrote, is one that “no mortal eye hath ever beheld or human mind conceived”.⁴⁶ Referring to the endeavour of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, who at the time were few in number, he stated: Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, 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.⁴⁷ The transformative and constructive powers inherent in the Faith are gradually becoming manifest in advanced clusters where Bahá'ís are working alongside their neighbours in a collective process and, through social action and participation in countless conversations, are learning to respond to the heightened social consciousness that springs in a natural way from intensive engagement in the core activities. The House of Justice has observed: An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with likeminded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations.⁴⁸ The Bahá'í community is now more able than ever before to advance “the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building”.⁴⁹ In contemplating the complexity of the process and the recurring challenges that lie ahead, there is no doubt that “endeavour, ceaseless endeavour, is required”,⁵⁰ as the Master described the task of establishing “true civilization”.⁵¹ At the same time, mindful of the countless expressions of Bahá'u'lláh's divine love and evidences of His all-conquering power in their lives, the friends press forward, labouring “serenely, confidently, and unremittingly”⁵² to contribute their talents and energies, no matter where they reside, to those efforts that are “conducive to the regeneration of the world and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth”.⁵³

January 2017

**Training Institutes:
Attaining a Higher Level of Functioning**

A document prepared by
The International Teaching Centre
Bahá'í World Centre
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In its message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the Universal House of Justice stated that attaining a higher level of functioning is a pressing concern of training institutes. This concern comes into sharp focus when viewed in the context of the goals before the Bahá'í world during this Five Year Plan: to “seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Ridván 2021”⁵⁴ and to add “several hundred more”⁵⁵ to some two hundred clusters that have already advanced beyond the third milestone. As stated by the House of Justice:

The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising.⁵⁶

In the institutional meetings held across the world to prepare for the beginning of the current Five Year Plan, the friends benefited from viewing what was happening in each cluster from two perspectives. The first, engaging in three-monthly cycles of activity through which the community grows, with attention to teaching the Faith and conversation with those from the wider society, and, the second, the unfoldment of the three educational imperatives overseen by the training institute. Regarding the latter, the House of Justice has stated the following:

In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.⁵⁷

To help the friends managing the operations of training institutes to respond to current exigencies, this document shares some insights from the body of experience that has accrued in the Bahá'í world about implementing the main sequence of courses, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the programme for the spiritual education of children. The document also addresses matters related to the institutional capacity of training institutes. It is hoped that in each region or country the friends responsible for the institute's endeavours will, taking their particular circumstances and experience into consideration, use these insights to further systematize their efforts.

1. THE MAIN SEQUENCE OF COURSES

As is generally understood, the study of institute courses in a given cluster often starts with only a small group of participants who then begin to offer one or another of the acts of service the courses recommend. For the process of growth to advance meaningfully, the number of people studying institute courses must continue to rise. The principal issues that lie at the heart of this objective include raising the number and enhancing the capacity of those serving as tutors, sustaining a steady flow of participants through the sequence of courses, and coordinating the institute's efforts through effective mechanisms.

1.1 Raising the Number and Enhancing the Capacity of Tutors

Fundamental to strengthening the educational programmes of the training institute is a steadily increasing number of capable tutors who, over time, are assisted to grow in effectiveness.

1.1.1 The initial cadre of tutors

Institutes face a number of questions with regard to clusters where a programme of growth is nascent, among them: how to meaningfully extend the reach of the study of institute courses to each cluster, and how to ensure that “within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors”⁵⁸

Local friends in clusters with new programmes of growth have initially relied on participating in the study of the courses offered by experienced tutors in more advanced clusters nearby or farther afield. They have also benefited from the services of one or two carefully selected and prepared visiting tutors drawn from the strong clusters who in some instances also serve as homefront pioneers for a short or long term. In either case, the tutors involved are most effective when they appreciate that they are promoting a process with far-reaching implications for the spiritual and material life of a population. Besides assisting the first batch of friends to arise and serve, through the courses they offer the tutors help build a strong foundation of understanding and experience on which the institute process is gradually erected.

Yet, it is not until some of the local friends begin serving as tutors that the institute truly takes root in a cluster and the number of those studying institute courses increases significantly. The first steps in this regard may be to encourage a few friends from among those who have studied the early courses and gained some experience with the related activities to begin helping others study the courses. Visiting tutors may begin by calling on these friends to help in leading discussions of sections of the materials and organizing the related practices. They might also delve with them deeper into challenging aspects of the study and practice under way. In this manner, some local friends are carefully enabled to start offering others at least the first two courses of the sequence. An in-depth review of these courses, carried out together with a study of portions of Ruhi Institute Book 7 and the continued aid of an experienced tutor, may further prepare the local friends for this task. As they serve in this manner and progress in their own study of the courses, their capacity to help others who desire to serve grows.

Where this approach is wisely applied, it sets a number of people on the path of learning how to facilitate a process through which the capacity of individuals eager to contribute to intensifying the community-building process is built. Further, by helping larger numbers of people to study institute courses, it provides as early as possible a growing base of participation by the local friends in the related activities. But a word of caution is in order. The desired outcomes are less likely to occur if the process of raising tutors becomes one in which everyone is asked to form a study group the moment he or she finishes one or two courses. In such instances, great effort may be expended and large numbers briefly obtained, but the results sought of enabling ever more people to promote the community-building process remain elusive.

1.1.2 An expanding body of tutors

When the services of one or two visiting tutors are reinforced by a few local friends who are learning to offer institute courses, this team of five or so individuals makes it possible to expand the number of people studying the courses and initiating activities, thus intensifying the work under way and propelling the cluster on its path of progress to move beyond the second milestone.

Yet, the cluster requires an expanding body of tutors if it is to continue to advance. If in each cluster the number of those capable of serving as tutors is to rise, more people from among those promoting teaching and community-building activities have to keep advancing along the sequence of courses. For it is only when ever-growing contingents are immersed in concurrent and sustained study and service that the body of effective tutors meaningfully expands. This underscores the cumulative character of the capacity-building process engendered by the sequence of courses. With each course studied, knowledge of the Faith increases, insights into spiritual matters deepen, spiritual susceptibilities expand, requisite qualities and attitudes develop, and skills and abilities sharpen. Individuals grow in the ability to investigate the Sacred Writings, to understand the reality of their community, and to engage in conversations of significance. They become better able to consult on their needs, to collaborate with others, and to reflect on and improve their efforts. As they become ever more conscious of the divine assistance surrounding them, they grow in confidence. When such an experience embraces more and more people, and many of them after studying Book 7 are assisted to form a study circle and serve as tutors, they apply all these abilities in efforts to accompany others on the path of service. In this manner, a cluster eventually comes to be served by a score or more local friends capable of acting as tutors. Through their efforts the number of individuals who are enabled to start and sustain core activities and other acts of service in the cluster steadily grows.

1.1.3 Raising the effectiveness of those serving as tutors

In its Riḍván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice observed that the worldwide Bahá'í community has “succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service”, and has “acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality”.⁵⁹ Within this lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement that can be fostered in local populations, and “much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect”.⁶⁰ The House of Justice further explained:

Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.⁶¹

Those responsible for overseeing the work of each institute are charged with learning how tutors can become increasingly effective in helping individuals release their potential to contribute to progress within the clusters they serve. In this regard, there are some specific concerns for each institute to address.

Friends who serve as tutors are most effective when they understand well the institute's purpose to raise human resources that are capable of fostering the process of community building through the application of Bahá'í teachings. These friends need to appreciate the nature of the institute process and “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”.⁶² They must become increasingly familiar with how the process enhances capabilities for serving the Cause by integrating study, practice, and service. As the tutors gain experience, they acquire deeper insights into how each institute book builds on the previous ones to empower individuals. They grasp the spiritual qualities each course elicits, the attitudes it promotes, the knowledge it imparts, the skills it endows, the act of service it introduces, and the interactions it fosters.

Ultimately, tutors grow to be capable of facilitating the study of the books in a way that enhances understanding and shapes attitudes, and of organizing the practical components in a manner that builds confidence. When tutors help participants to begin applying, first in the context of the study circle and then in the community, what they are learning, everyone—the tutors included—appreciates better the nature of the unfolding community-building process. Further, tutors promote a spiritually empowering environment and profound friendship among those studying together. They link budding efforts of these friends to the process of community building under way and to the institutions and agencies of the Faith that stand ready to support all those studying institute courses.

Of course, “the capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans”.⁶³ The coordinators of the training institute ensure that those acting as tutors are properly supported by, among other means, promoting mutual support and assistance among the tutors, working alongside them in the field, and gathering them in meetings for reflection.

Mutual support and assistance

Coordinators strive to create in a cluster an atmosphere in which those serving as tutors— new and veteran alike—assist one another in their service. Experienced tutors make themselves available to those taking their initial

steps by either offering together with them some of the courses or sharing with them their insights. However, irrespective of the experience of the individuals involved, carrying out activities together in the field and drawing on one another's knowledge serves not only to strengthen abilities but also to deepen commitment.

Working alongside tutors and organizing gatherings for reflection

Coordinators “bring both practical experience and dynamism”⁶⁴ to their efforts to work in the field with those serving as tutors. The concrete questions that confront the tutors are many. For instance, they seek to learn about the nature and content of a conversation effective at inviting someone to study Book 1, how to organize the first meeting of a study circle, how to articulate well the aim of the sequence of courses and purpose of each book, and how to keep the discussion of the themes in the course focused and advancing. Many of these questions are answered in the field as the tutors labour together with others and are accompanied by a coordinator or a more experienced colleague.

Such interactions are complemented by regular gatherings of tutors for reflection and for further study of the courses. In these occasions, tutors review relevant materials to deepen their understanding of concepts underlying the institute process and the Plans of the Faith, reflect on the efforts under way, articulate their evolving experience, and examine further the books they are offering. Depending on the number of tutors, these meetings happen at different levels of the community—a village or neighbourhood, a cluster or a number of adjoining clusters, and even a region or a country. Some gatherings involve all the tutors and address matters of general interest; others focus on specific groups, for instance, new tutors, those facilitating a specific course, or those working with a segment of a population, such as youth or women. These occasions are most effective when the consultations of the friends are organized around a set of questions about which they are learning.

1.2 Ensuring a Steady Flow of Participants through the Sequence of Courses

Capacity to sustain a steady flow of people through the institute courses expands as the friends in a cluster learn to engage increasing numbers in conversations on the teachings of the Faith, nurture the participation of youth, manage a growing stream of young people from junior youth groups into the main sequence, and use in a complementary manner study circles and institute campaigns as modes of course delivery.

1.2.1 Fostering conversations on the teachings of the Faith

The capacity to involve growing numbers in the study of institute courses advances along with the ability to foster increasingly rich conversations about the Bahá'í teachings within a population. The sequence of courses itself lends some structure to how these conversations unfold. In its message dated 29 December 2015, the Universal House of Justice stated:

From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities.⁶⁵

The pattern and quality of the movement of people through the sequence of courses greatly impacts how conversations on the teachings advance in a population. The description that follows, although generalized, will help to illustrate this point.

In a village or neighbourhood where a small group begins to study Book 1, the participants naturally converse on such spiritual matters as the Word of God, prayer, and the life of the soul.

Praying, reading the writings, and taking oneself into account begin to take root among them as a daily discipline. Possibility for exploring together other themes from the writings of the Faith grows when these friends are offered and begin reading the Hidden Words, as recommended in the first unit of Book 1. The reach of this conversation expands when they initiate visits to the homes of their friends and neighbours to share prayers. The introduction of a few devotional meetings provides a space where more people, Bahá'í or not, gather to pray and reflect on the implications of the Writings for their individual and collective life. This seemingly simple advance becomes a means for inviting to the study of institute courses those who show receptivity, leading to an increase in people entering the path of service.

When some among those who have completed Book 1 come to study Book 2, the themes and concepts on which they deliberate with others broaden to include, for example, the eternal Covenant, unity in the community, Bahá'í principles relating to various social teachings, and others that arise as the friends learn to respond to the needs of the hearer. The homes they visit in this connection become additional venues for profound conversations. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the spiritual instruction of children—and on the part individuals, families, and the community play in this regard—begin to be considered as some study Book 3 and a few children's classes are formed. Even a simple event convened with some regularity for families and neighbours to find out what the children are learning elevates discussion on the meaning and implication of a community nurturing its children spiritually.

When some people study Book 4, the conversations begin to touch more deeply on the Persons of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb and on the interplay between crisis and victory that Their noble lives illustrate. The study of Book 5 fuels exchanges on Bahá'í teachings relating to spiritually empowering the junior youth, which, given the societal forces assailing this age group, resonate with youth, parents, and community leaders. The study of Book 6 fosters the capacity to engage in “a conversation between two souls”⁶⁶—a direct teaching effort that “can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation”.⁶⁷

Thus, each course studied assists in enabling an expanding number of friends to express their “understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance”.⁶⁸ In this way, a village or a neighbourhood is gradually suffused with discussions founded on the teachings of the Faith and on the emerging experience in applying them to creating a new pattern of collective life. With the range of possible conversations, and “as experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause”.⁶⁹

The manner in which this capacity to engage a population in conversations on the teachings is further systematized is described in the following statement of the Universal House of Justice:

As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes.⁷⁰

Besides portraying how the sequence of courses gives shape to the unfolding of meaningful conversations on the teachings of the Faith in a population, what the description above seeks to show is how the reach, depth, and coherence of these conversations, on the one hand, and the increase in the number of people studying institute courses, on the other, fuel each other.

1.2.2 Learning to nurture the participation of youth in institute courses

It is clear from the foregoing that much of the progress of a cluster depends on the ability of the friends to engage a population in diverse and weighty conversations on the Bahá'í teachings and then to draw its members into an educational process that multiplies their powers to contribute to the building of a new society. It is natural, then, that at any point in this process the friends would encounter certain particularly receptive segments of that population. As the House of Justice has stated, the youth represent “a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out”.⁷¹ Initial endeavours to open a particular channel for the entry of youth into the sequence of courses in a cluster are necessarily modest. Effort is made—sometimes through specially organized gatherings—to reach out to a group of youth, engage them in discussions that open before their eyes “a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world”,⁷² invite them to study the institute courses, and then assist them to move swiftly into the arena of service. Often this involves the intensive study of a set of courses such as Book 1, 3, and 5, since the acts of service to which they are first introduced are usually teaching children's classes and helping groups of junior youth. As the process of growth advances, the manner in which the young people study institute courses gradually comes to conform for

the most part to the sequence in which the courses are arranged. The institute might, however, from time to time offer some youth a selected number of courses in order to accelerate the multiplication of activities.

1.2.3 A flow from junior youth groups into the main sequence

Another channel opens up as more and more of those in the junior youth groups turn 15 years old and are assisted to begin studying institute courses. Early in the process of growth a cluster may experience entry into the main sequence by a few such young people. The first noticeable flow from the groups might, however, occur only after the first three or so years of offering the programme. Even then it might be quite modest. Only when capacity to sustain large numbers of junior youth in stable groups is present in a cluster does an appreciable flow happen.

To embrace the young people from the groups into institute courses, the agencies gradually learn to track the progression of cohorts of junior youth through the texts; to help them see, as they near the completion of the programme or the age of 15, the prospects for further study and service that await them; to organize formal events to welcome them as individuals or as groups into the main sequence; and to prepare the tutors, who, in some cases, may be the same friends who accompanied them as animators, to work well with them. While the young people “represent a vast reservoir of energy and talent that can be devoted to the advancement of spiritual and material civilization”⁷³ and they can do much to boost the efforts in a cluster, expectations of how fast they can advance need to remain reasonable. Rushing them through the sequence for the sole purpose of increasing one activity or another might in the long term prove counterproductive. It would be best for them to advance along the sequence of courses at a natural pace.

1.2.4 Progression along the sequence of courses

In its message dated 12 December 2011 to all National Spiritual Assemblies, the Universal House of Justice stated the following:

The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá’í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community.⁷⁴

In this light, to raise more and more human resources in each cluster, “an increasing number of friends are recruited to enter the first basic course, and relatively significant percentages are then helped to reach higher and higher courses, acquiring thereby the needed capabilities of service”.⁷⁵ If only a small fraction of those who have studied the first course advance to the second one, and another small fraction of these friends advance to the third course, and so on, the work of the institute and ultimately the process of growth itself are robbed of the required dynamism.

Progress of many people through the sequence of courses is more likely to occur when the friends are able to associate their studies to specific action. They are eager to study the next course in the sequence when they understand that moving together along a path of service enables them to contribute to the advancement of their community. Such progress may be impeded when the courses are inadvertently presented as an end in themselves or as a mere deepening, when the pace of study is too slow or too fast, when deliberations on concepts are not associated with experience, or when the practical components of the courses are neglected.

To ensure that the number of those proceeding along the sequence is substantial, institute coordinators, often with other agencies in the cluster, meet periodically to review the flow of participants from one book to the next. To determine when undue lag in the progression of many friends has occurred and what its causes may be, they rely on accurate information about participation in the courses. On the basis of a sound analysis, the institute may introduce measures—such as discussions with the friends, well-timed institute campaigns, and the assistance of visiting tutors—to remove obstacles standing in the way of the continued participation of many people.

1.2.5 The delivery of institute courses

In most clusters worldwide, study circles remain the predominant mode of delivering institute courses. In a cluster with a nascent programme of growth, the first study circles are usually formed by visiting tutors or a homefront pioneer. As the number of local friends who can act as tutors grows, the capacity to establish study circles necessarily increases. Apart from helping growing numbers to arise and serve, well-functioning study circles foster among the friends and between them and the institutions loving and mutually supportive interactions that bind these protagonists of the Plan together in unified action.

Study circles derive much of their effectiveness from the fact that they each constitute a small group of friends who study the courses together in a local setting with the explicit purpose of learning to apply Bahá'í teachings to their personal and collective life and to thus contribute to a profound process of change. In an environment marked by sincere friendship and common purpose, the members study the institute courses, engage in service and extracurricular activities, and promote this mode of learning to others. As more and more friends serve as tutors, various segments of a community's inhabitants—youth, women, mothers, couples, young professionals, and families—come to be accommodated in the study of the courses and to play a part in efforts to promote spiritual and material well-being. The study circles become distinct features of the life of the community when they operate with a measure of formality, incorporating elements such as a formal beginning and ending, a certain membership, and a defined schedule. Also, diverse and expanding numbers of the friends progress along the sequence of courses when a degree of flexibility is allowed—the members, for instance, adjust as needed the pace at which they perform the various activities, and while some of them may leave when a particular course concludes, others might join as the study of a new one commences. To ensure that the study of any particular course is not overly prolonged, the friends might complement regular study with occasions for intensive study that might last a weekend or a few days. When they have a healthy rhythm of progress, study circles do much to invigorate programmes of growth.

In order to accelerate the flow of large numbers of friends along the sequence of courses, study circles usually operate alongside institute campaigns. In clusters where there is great receptivity, campaigns might for a while even be the main mode of course delivery. Involving the intensive study of two or more institute courses over a relatively short time, institute campaigns are held at all levels of the community—local, cluster or group of clusters, regional, or national. The institutions and friends of the locality where the campaign is held are often involved in planning and providing resources, and the campaigns are most effective when they are scheduled during times of the year when many people can participate. A team of tutors—some perhaps drawn from other communities or clusters—may be tasked with implementing the campaign; these friends are required to give creative thought to carrying out the practical components and accompanying the participants to initiate or extend their acts of service. When offered in a locality, campaigns not only increase a community's human resources within a short period but also raise local capacity to support institute activities and invigorate the work of teaching and consolidation through the practice and service activities of the participants.

For the agencies in a cluster, having a record of all study circles and institute campaigns helps them to draw on the participants for the tasks of teaching, consolidation, and community building. Occasionally, the agencies might gather all those studying institute courses to reflect with them on their studies and services, to nurture their commitment, and to help them integrate into the life of the community. As for the training institute, its responsibility is to design, based on local circumstances, an approach to course delivery that coherently combines study circles and institute campaigns so that capacity to enable ever-larger numbers of people to progress along the sequence of courses can continue to grow and become manifest in an increasingly vibrant process of community building.

1.3 Coordination of the Main Sequence of Courses

The efficacy of the training institute depends largely on there being at every point as a cluster advances an effective arrangement for supporting the tutors, visiting or local. When a programme of growth is still nascent, support might come from a homefront pioneer, a veteran tutor or a coordinator from a nearby cluster, an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant, or a regional or national coordinator. As more local friends begin serving as tutors, the most experienced among them complement such external assistance by beginning to help others. Often, after a cluster has passed the second milestone, the number of local tutors begins to notably increase and a local coordinator is named from among the tutors most willing to assist others in their services. In his or her efforts to accompany the tutors, such a coordinator might continue to benefit, on the one hand, from the support of a more experienced colleague from an advanced cluster or a regional or national coordinator, and, on the other hand, from the assistance of capable local tutors with whom he or she collaborates. In a cluster that has passed the third milestone, in which the number of tutors grows even larger, an additional coordinator or two for the main sequence may be named from among the collaborators. It is, however, unreasonable to expect that, as a cluster progresses further, “capacity would be built by simply assigning more and more coordinators”⁷⁶ to it. Strengthening mutual support and assistance among the tutors guarantees that each of them is always adequately supported.

Irrespective of the scope of the community-building process in a cluster and the arrangements in place to support the tutors, the concerns that shape the endeavours of the coordinators are mostly the same. In general, they ensure that the number of those acting as tutors rises and capacity among them to offer the full range of institute courses advances. They pay special attention to promoting the study of Book 7, help tutors to form study circles, and aid them to learn to facilitate effectively the study of the courses and the implementation of the practical components. New tutors especially require help inviting people to study the institute courses and enabling the participants to grasp the purpose and workings of a study circle. They often also benefit from receiving assistance in facilitating the first few sections of whatever course they are offering. Through such support, the tutors come to appreciate that individuals persist in their studies when they see themselves growing in understanding, enhancing their capabilities for service, and engaging in spiritually enriching interactions. To help the tutors foster such conditions in their study circles, coordinators, as stated earlier, cultivate loving collaboration among the tutors, labour alongside them in the field, and gather them in meetings for reflection.

Depending on the circumstances on the ground, any one of the coordinators of the three educational imperatives—the main sequence of courses, the junior youth programme, and the programme for spiritual education of children—might be named first. Initially he or she might also follow the other activities until other coordinators emerge. And when all are in place, they learn to complement one another and to periodically “examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole”.⁷⁷ In collaborating with members of the Area Teaching Committee and with the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, coordinators—whether there is one or several—contribute to assessing the progress of the community-building process and ensuring that the activities in the cluster advance coherently. When, for instance, the Area Teaching Committee promotes during each cycle a wide range of conversations on the teachings, the number of people beginning to study the courses can be expected to rise. Equally, when the coordinator for the main sequence keeps the Committee informed of all the study circles and institute campaigns occurring, the Committee can draw on the participants to advance the teaching work.

At the regional or national level, coordinators for the main sequence of courses ensure that for each cluster there is an arrangement for supporting the tutors and that this arrangement is not only effective but also adapts and

expands in response to growth. In this light, they ensure the timely appointment of cluster coordinators. By working together with the cluster coordinators in the field and bringing them together in reflection meetings, they help these friends continue to grow in their capacity to support the tutors. Appreciating the need for all coordinators at the cluster level to benefit from what is being learned across the region or country, the coordinators organize interactions among cluster coordinators that often involve visits to clusters where relevant experience is being generated. For a small region or country, one coordinator may be sufficient. For a larger one, two or more are needed over time and each may be assigned to a part of the region or country. As is the case at the cluster level, regional or national coordinators of the main sequence also work closely with the coordinators for the junior youth programme and the programme for the spiritual education of children while also collaborating with the Regional Bahá'í Council, if one exists, and the Auxiliary Board members. Furthermore, they play a critical part in regional or national consultative and planning processes.

2. THE JUNIOR YOUTH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMME

When in its message dated 27 December 2005 the Universal House of Justice urged all National Spiritual Assemblies to “consider the junior youth groups formed through programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right”,⁷⁸ further impetus was given to the expansion of this vital educational imperative. The progress made since then has been impressive. Training institutes in almost all national Bahá'í communities worldwide are now implementing the programme, albeit at varying levels of quantitative and qualitative development. Globally, over 550,000 young people have already studied at least the first text of the programme. Those currently engaged exceed 150,000 in more than 17,000 groups. Thousands of youth, who find in the junior youth programme “an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them”,⁷⁹ are serving as animators of the groups, and hundreds of them as coordinators or assistants to coordinators. Although the expansion has been more remarkable in some parts of the world than in others, junior youth groups have generally found fertile soil across a range of social realities—from small villages to the neighbourhoods of large metropolitan cities. More than 2,600 clusters with a programme of growth have at least one junior youth group, and some 70 have 30 or more groups, with 300 or more participants.

Notwithstanding the progress made, the capacity to offer the programme in cluster after cluster has to grow further. Two broad realities are apparent in this regard: clusters where the friends are striving to establish an intensive programme of growth, where the junior youth programme may be in its early stages; and clusters where the friends are labouring to embrace large numbers, where some basic capacity is present on which the friends are building.

2.1 Clusters Where the Friends are Establishing an Intensive Programme of Growth

The knowledge garnered from efforts around the world makes it possible to visualize with greater clarity the path of progress of the junior youth programme in a cluster. Institutes now have to apply the available understanding in endeavours to firmly establish junior youth groups in all clusters with a programme of growth. Whether the initial efforts start with young people from Bahá'í families or those drawn from the wider community, what needs to be achieved in such clusters may be conceived as helping the local friends develop the basic capacity required to establish the programme on a sound enough foundation upon which it can grow to edify hundreds of junior youth and invigorate whole communities. This is no easy task.

Numerically, it often involves engaging and sustaining some 50 to 100 junior youth in about 5 to 10 groups, a capacity that is currently present in some 600 clusters worldwide.

Experience indicates that there are several dimensions to the requisite capacity. Principally, there emerges in each cluster a growing cadre of friends dedicated to the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. The growth of the programme is greatly facilitated when these friends, however few they may be, learn to read accurately the reality of their community and to identify local factors that might propel the programme or curtail its progress. The friends become increasingly capable of conversing with the community on the empowerment of the junior youth, a conversation that draws primarily on the teachings of the Faith about this age group, most of which is clearly articulated in Book 5 of the sequence of courses. This conversation also provides opportunity to reflect on certain elements of the culture of the population that are conducive or contrary to the spiritual empowerment of young people. Noteworthy too is engaging ever-growing numbers of youth in systematic conversations on “the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society”⁸⁰ and on “providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations”.⁸¹ Inviting the youth to study institute courses is an essential aspect that is fostered from the very start, and this is only possible when capable tutors of Book 5, whether visiting or local, are available to each cluster. The study of that course is most effective when in determining how to offer it, the conditions of the youth and their experience are taken into account.

Once a few groups are formed, sustaining them depends on how the animators are accompanied to learn to facilitate effectively the study of the junior youth texts and to complement it with artistic activities, social interaction, and service projects. Pairing them with experienced animators when possible, gathering them in periodic meetings to review the texts, enabling them to learn from others more experienced, bringing them together in occasions to study the institute courses and the junior youth texts are all proved to be effective ways in which they can be supported. If animators are to grow in capacity to not just help junior youth but also contribute in various ways to bettering their communities, they gradually have to be assisted to appreciate the full extent of the community-building process unfolding locally and the context within which the junior youth programme is unfolding.

Helping more and more youth to serve as animators contributes both to an increase in the number of groups and to the stability and resilience of the programme. With more trained animators, those that leave can be more easily replaced, and if one animator is unable to facilitate the study of a particular text, an experienced colleague steps in. When the junior youth in the groups functioning in a village or neighbourhood, or even in a cluster, are seen as enrolled into one educational system and their animators as collaborators in supporting all of them, occasions for coming together to study some of the texts in camps or to implement service projects together become a more pronounced feature of the programme in a cluster.

The programme is strengthened when those overseeing it in a cluster have explicit and reasonable expectations of what can be accomplished over the course of a year. Currently nine texts are available to the junior youth. While it is at present anticipated that the junior youth will go through at least three texts in the first year, establishing a rhythm of study that guarantees such progress sometimes proves difficult. This challenge is best met when the way in which the programme is implemented takes into account the circumstances of the young people—both junior youth and youth—in the community, the various activities in which they are engaged at school and at home, the general pattern of life of their community, and the periods during the year of intense and of relaxed activity. Such understanding sets the stage for how in a cluster the junior youth will proceed through the texts during a year—when, for instance, they will study at a regular pace in their groups and when they will all be brought together in camps for intensive study and service.

Yet another aspect of capacity to establish a sound and steadily expanding programme in a cluster is the involvement of the parents and the entire community. The conversations that occur as a group is formed and continue throughout its life help to build unity of vision, thought, and action. Occasions when the parents meet and the community gathers to reflect on the progress and efforts of the junior youth both extend this conversation and inject into the programme the necessary vitality. When they consult, the parents and the animators explore together the programme's underlying concepts, efforts to promote junior youth groups in the community and with other families, ways to acquire the essential materials, and means to mobilize resources for camps and other collective endeavours.

As each cluster moves towards the second milestone and beyond, training institutes everywhere will focus on building the capacity to raise the junior youth programme to this basic level. To assist them in this regard, the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre has captured the knowledge and insights thus far generated in a document titled "Developing the capacity to engage 50 to 100 participants in the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme". The remarks above summarize some of the document's contents. It is hoped that it will be studied by all the friends promoting the programme at the national, regional, and cluster levels.

2.2 Clusters Where the Friends are Learning to Embrace Large Numbers

In all clusters where the capacity described above is present, the friends are now striving to cultivate further the associated interrelated abilities. They are enhancing capacity to engage at least a few hundred junior youth in tens of groups, reaching in this regard some 300 junior youth in about 30 or so groups. One question before them in this connection is how to increase capacity to raise growing numbers of animators in neighbourhoods and villages that are becoming centres of intense activity, some of which may be ripe for enlisting in the groups the majority, if not all, of the local junior youth. Earlier in the cluster's development, one or two tutors of Book 5 may have sufficed to raise the initial cohort of animators. At this point, more of such tutors are required if growing numbers of youth, and beyond them parents and members of local institutions, are to study the course. Attention to the quality of the junior youth groups also becomes more pronounced. Animators are closely accompanied to learn how to consciously help the junior youth enhance the power of their expression, the acuity of their perception, and the depth of their interaction. Ongoing and creative thought is given to service projects initiated by the groups. By drawing other members of the community into these projects, those initiatives showing great promise are sustained over longer periods. With such progress, the junior youth programme attracts the support of many of the local people and leaders who lend a hand through several means. Additionally, opportunities to form junior youth groups in other settings such as schools and community centres arise over time. In these various ways every aspect of the learning experience in which the young people are immersed comes to impact markedly their life and that of the community in general.

Besides accompanying them in their service, youth serving as animators are supported in other ways as well. In the context of their service to the Faith and the community, they are, for instance, encouraged in their formal education and assisted to think about the prospects for tertiary training and for career development before them. During reflection gatherings, animators deliberate also on such matters and on other noble aspirations. In this they receive the aid of not only the institute coordinators but also other institutions and agencies of the Faith, such as Auxiliary Board members and Local Spiritual Assemblies.

In a community where the programme has reached such a level of quantitative and qualitative progress, rich conversations on the moral and intellectual well-being of young people proliferate. These conversations take place in the homes and during occasions such as devotional gatherings, community meetings, and institutional conferences. They also become a feature of the expansion phase of the cycle of activities. Gradually, the programme's fundamental concepts, aims, and objectives come to be expressed through other means of communication, for instance, drama, music, or film. Where the programme is operating at this level, large numbers of animators are sustaining their efforts from year to year and progressively more youngsters are continuing in the groups for the programme's three-year duration. A growing number of them are beginning to enter the main sequence of courses and to offer acts of service.

As has been mentioned, there are about 70 clusters worldwide where the programme is reaching this level of development and the friends are involving more than 300 junior youth in the groups. In some of these clusters the number of participants even exceeds 1,000. Achieving the progress described above in several hundred more clusters where the friends are learning to embrace large numbers is an important aspect of the current Plan. The part to be played by learning sites in this regard is critical, for they ensure that the process of learning associated with each further stage of the programme's growth is effectively extended and systematized in the clusters with which they are associated. And as capacity exists, they collaborate with training institutes to carry the work to other advanced clusters.

2.3 Coordination of Junior Youth Groups

All of these efforts depend on there being at every point in the programme's advance a scheme for accompanying animators that matches the need. As the groups multiply and become more established, the organizational scheme in place evolves in complexity. In the early stages, the support of an experienced individual from a cluster close by may be adequate. This is soon supplemented by animators working in teams and the assistance of the more experienced among them. Eventually one or more coordinators are named from among the local animators. As they take on their responsibilities they learn from veteran coordinators in more advanced clusters and collaborate closely with the cluster coordinator of the main sequence and of children's classes, if and when they are in place.

At the regional or national level, a coordinator is named usually from among the most experienced cluster coordinators. As the number of junior youth groups increase across the region or country, an additional coordinator or two is named. The regional or national coordinators work with the cluster coordinators in the field and bring them together in meetings of reflection. Capacity to support the programme advances greatly when a team emerges at the regional or national level composed of the coordinators and other experienced individuals who, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members, have a clear vision of the growth of the programme across the entire region or country. As is the case at the cluster level, close collaboration with the coordinators of the main sequence and the children's education programme is an important aspect of the mode of operation at the regional or national level.

Further, for capacity to grow, the institute and the learning site, where one is in place, foster a dynamic collaboration. The regional or national coordinators and the resource persons work together in the field and, through such spaces as learning site seminars and institute gatherings, learn from one another. The knowledge and experience that emerge from the network of clusters associated with a learning site is transferred to the training institute, and the insights generated by the training institute in further extending the reach of the programme is shared with the learning sites.

3. THE PROGRAMME FOR THE SPIRITUAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

As the Universal House of Justice has stated, "concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá'í community".⁸² Over the last Plan, the number of children participating in the classes expanded significantly, reaching over 210,000 globally. The growing capacities of institutes to train teachers and assist them to form classes, and the expanding mechanisms to support their service and progress, are among the factors that have contributed to such growth. Fundamentally, however, it is the mounting dedication of individuals and institutions—indeed of the community as a whole—to nurturing and empowering spiritually its young members that has provided the primary impetus. This is evident in the fact that the number of children's classes has increased most in clusters where junior youth groups have also steadily multiplied.

The current Plan's objective of intensifying further the community-building process in 5,000 clusters worldwide calls for marked development of the capacity to spiritually educate children. Some of the particular demands in this regard relate to clusters where the friends are striving to establish an intensive programme of growth. In most of these clusters, experience with children's classes remains largely rudimentary. Other demands are associated with those clusters where the friends are learning to embrace large numbers, where most children's classes are currently found.

3.1 Clusters Where the Friends are Establishing an Intensive Programme of Growth

In clusters where the experience of the friends with children's classes is in its initial stages, a principal need is establishing a few classes by building organically on whatever activities are present. From among those engaged in the core activities and the conversations under way, a few who show interest in teaching children are trained as teachers and assisted to form the first two or three classes.

In each cluster with a few classes, a small team of teachers is learning how to offer, lesson after lesson, the first grade, often to children of varying ages. Much more is happening, however. A conversation on "the value of Bahá'í education and of a proper spiritual upbringing"⁸³ is being set in motion; the parents and teachers are establishing a collaborative relationship; and the classes themselves are becoming a means to inspiring other people in the community who are inclined to this area of service. Further, a team of friends who over time might assume various duties related to promoting children's classes is emerging from among the teachers, the parents, and others.

As the classes grow in both quantity and quality, the institute strengthens its capacity to train ever-growing numbers of teachers and to help them learn to teach grade after grade.

A basic organizational scheme is gradually built, and a pattern of collaboration among the teachers, parents, and institutions is progressively put in place.

3.1.1 Raising the first contingent of teachers

Initial efforts to increase the number of friends teaching children include raising tutors in a country or region who are capable of facilitating effectively the study of Book 3 of the sequence of courses. Initially most of such individuals are drawn from among the experienced teachers and tutors in the more advanced clusters. When they learn to offer Book 3 in a manner that raises the understanding of the participants, enhances their commitment to the education of children, and sharpens their skills and abilities, the spiritual education of children is established on a strong footing.

Although the first teachers in a cluster may come from any segment of the population, young mothers and youth—both boys and girls—tend to be the first to respond. Mothers bring to the effort their experience of parenting and more readily engage other parents in related conversations. As for the youth, when they are involved in deep discussions on their responsibility to the community, they respond especially well when invited to work with children and junior youth. Building a team of a few mothers and youth who collaborate to teach the first few classes should be a possibility within the reach of every cluster.

Regarding the training, it is, of course, envisioned that those teaching children would need to have studied at least the first three courses of the sequence. All the qualities and abilities treated in these three courses, among them developing spiritual identity and habits, engaging in systematic conversations, and teaching a simple class of children, are relevant to a children's class teacher. Nevertheless, some flexibility in how individuals proceed through these courses is often necessary in the early stages. Friends interested in teaching children have sometimes studied the first and third courses, formed classes, and then proceeded to study the second and other courses. In some instances, forming children's classes is integrated into the study of Book 3, so that by the time the teachers finish the course some classes have already begun. Whatever approach is initially adopted depends on the experience and circumstances of the people involved, and the support available.

3.1.2 Operation of the classes

At an early stage, the main issues pertaining to the operation of children's classes include helping the teachers learn to hold the classes with increasing regularity, become adept at handling the various components of the lessons in the first grade, and strengthen relationships with parents. In this regard, the teachers meet often to review the lessons, explore their principle spiritual objectives, share experiences, and determine how to assist one another. To continue to grow in capacity, the teachers persist in their study of institute courses. As relevant experience accrues, the teachers' commitment to spiritually educating children strengthens, and so does that of the parents and the community in general. This enables a community to sustain the initial classes established.

The teachers' ability to collaborate with parents is another pertinent issue at this initial stage. Teachers learn to periodically visit parents in their homes to acquaint them with the progress being made and to elicit whatever assistance is necessary. Efforts to enhance this vital relationship are seamlessly integrated into the various activities associated with implementing the programme. For instance, teachers and parents study or review segments of Book 3 together, and parents occasionally join the teachers when they come together for reflection. The teachers and parents are, as a result, increasingly engaged in a conversation that nurtures among them a deep sense of solidarity. This conversation is gradually extended within the community, fostering friendship among the families and interactions in various spaces, including devotional meetings, that serve to attract the hearts of both children and parents to Bahá'u'lláh.

3.2 Clusters Where the Friends are Learning to Embrace Large Numbers

In advanced clusters, institutes are building on the capacities so far developed in order to increase significantly the number of children receiving spiritual education and to organize them in a systematic programme. The training of teachers is being further augmented; the teachers are learning to offer the first three grades and higher, as they become available; and the classes are becoming more formalized. Further, a pattern of coordination able to accompany steadily expanding numbers of teachers in neighbourhoods and villages is emerging. The development of children's classes in these contexts is contributing notably to the community-building process.

3.2.1 The training of teachers and progression of children from grade to grade

Children's classes multiply significantly as the number of people advancing through the sequence of courses grows and some among them join the initial group of teachers in spiritually educating more and more children. This is especially the case in clusters where the friends are able to engage growing numbers of youth in meaningful conversations and assist them to study institute courses.

As the teachers learn to organize Grade 1 classes, they continue to advance along the main sequence of courses. At the same time, they are assisted to study the branch courses of Book 3 that prepare them to offer the subsequent grades of the classes for which materials are currently available. The qualities, skills, and abilities of the teachers sharpen further as they are brought together periodically in reflection gatherings.

The experience acquired from teaching the classes week after week, and the understanding obtained from participating with others in gatherings for reflection, enable the teachers to appreciate even further the special nature of the service they are rendering. Their relationship with the parents of the children grows stronger as they interact with them more regularly, whether through home visits, special consultative meetings, or reflection gatherings. In addition, their ability to contribute to the community-building process under way advances meaningfully when they play a part in various gatherings where the community consults, reflects, and plans. All these factors combine to strengthen the teachers' dedication to the programme's objectives, sharpen their vision of its development, and consolidate their resolve to sustain their efforts from year to year.

3.2.2 Further formalization of the classes

Growth in the number of children receiving spiritual education necessitates more formalization of the classes. Organizing the children into age-based classes, outlining an annual schedule, and convening special events, such as children's festivals, are among some elements of a formal system that receive due attention. While previously the classes may have included children of different ages, classes for distinct age groups are formed as more teachers become available within the locality. An annual calendar that is consistent with the pattern of life of the population is established detailing when during a year the classes generally commence, when they take a break, and when they close, even as arrangements are made to accommodate new classes forming at any time during the year. The calendar might also include dates for reflection gatherings of teachers and other cluster events that require the participation of teachers and children. Certain formal meetings are held at particular points during the year involving teachers, children and their families, members of the institutions, and other interested individuals in the community. What the children are accomplishing is shared with those present, the efforts of both the children and teachers are acknowledged, and as the children and teachers move from one grade to the next, some recognition of this achievement is made. Further, as the children advance through the classes, those turning 12 are welcomed into the junior youth programme.

3.3 Coordination of Children's Classes

During the early stages of the programme's development, teachers, however few they may be, learn to function as a team that meets regularly. The meetings of the team might initially be spearheaded by the most experienced among them. Sometimes regional institutes have assigned to each cluster a veteran teacher or a coordinator from an advanced cluster, or the Auxiliary Board member might designate a capable assistant, to visit the teachers regularly and accompany them in their efforts. Dedication mounts among the teachers when they are enabled to interact with a larger body of their colleagues through gatherings hosted in more advanced clusters nearby.

As the number of teachers grows and their experience deepens, one among them who has demonstrated capacity to help others is formally designated as coordinator. Such an individual might, of course, continue to receive assistance from an experienced coordinator from another cluster as he or she assumes more formally the tasks of supporting others.

The continued multiplication of the classes in clusters in which the friends are learning to embrace large numbers in the community-building process places increasing demands on the system of coordination. Here, the ability of teachers to work in teams requires continued strengthening, as does the ability of experienced teachers to help new teachers or those starting to teach a new grade. While one coordinator, perhaps working with a small team of collaborators, can support 10 to 15 teachers, an additional coordinator is often required as the number of classes expands further. In any case, an organizational scheme emerges over time in an advanced cluster which accommodates teams of collaborating teachers, experienced teachers that help the coordinators support others, and a number of coordinators that ensure that the classes are being sustained, the teachers are growing in capacity, and the families and the entire community are appropriately engaged.

At the regional or national level, the major concern is, of course, ensuring that the friends in each cluster are supported so that, whatever the cluster's stage of development, children's classes increase in both number and effectiveness. Raising tutors of Book 3 and ensuring that they are available to all clusters is, as demonstrated, an indispensable aspect of the support provided. Making certain that each cluster is served by some organizational scheme, including drawing on coordinators and experienced individuals from other clusters as needed, is another. As coordinators emerge in cluster after cluster, those serving at the regional or national level assist them in the field and bring them together in reflection gatherings that address questions relevant to the stage of development of the children's classes in their cluster. All materials in sufficient quantities and appropriate languages are provided to the teachers and children at all ages. Careful attention to the flow of knowledge from advanced clusters where a greater range of experience is being generated makes it possible for other clusters to benefit and advance expeditiously. And, as is the case with the main sequence of courses and the junior youth programme, over time a team emerges at the regional or national level composed of the coordinators and other experienced individuals who, in collaboration with the Auxiliary Board members, grow in capacity to follow the development of the programme.

4. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

The progress of each and all of the institute's programmes ultimately depends on the strength of the institute as an agency of the Faith operating at the level of a country or region. There are currently over 300 training institutes worldwide, which range in scope from those in small countries with a handful of clusters with a programme of growth to those in large regions where the number of such clusters might exceed 100. In all but a few cases, these institutes operate under a board of directors. Although in general all boards bear the same responsibilities, their particular operations vary depending on the range of the institute's work. At any rate, it is vital that members of a board, national or regional coordinators, Auxiliary Board members, and a cadre of believers with the relevant experience learn to collaborate effectively in supporting the institute's various responsibilities.

Irrespective of the scope of the work of the institute, the board and those with whom it closely collaborates in a region or country strive to enhance a number of related institutional capacities. They endeavour to formulate a clear vision of the progress of the educational processes, foster capacity to learn systematically and to disseminate the accruing knowledge, and support a healthy evolution of the institute's organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. They also labour to raise capable human resources for the institute's various

purposes, manage effectively financial and material resources, and address pertinent administrative concerns, especially in relation to institute staff and statistics. The complexity of each of these issues naturally grows as the community-building process advances in an increasing number of clusters across a region.

4.1 Formulating a Vision

Guidance to foster the growth of the Faith at its current stage of development is, of course, provided in the messages of the Universal House of Justice. As the friends study the guidance, read the reality of their country or region, and reflect on their experience, they are able to formulate a vision centred on advancing the two essential movements at the heart of the process of growth: the steady flow of individuals through the sequence of courses offered by the training institute and the movement of clusters along a continuum of development. In the context of this general vision for the country or region, the institute articulates its own particular vision for the spiritual education of the friends for the duration of the Plan. This might involve not only what is possible to accomplish in each cluster with regard to the three educational imperatives but also the main strategies and approaches to be pursued. The institute then formulates annually a plan and budget, and every cycle an operational plan. Where capacity for such methodical planning is well developed, the work of the institute is characterized by clarity of thought and systematic action. Its lines of action are well-defined, and the deliberations among the friends at the forefront of its operations are both practical and far-sighted.

4.2 Learning and the Ability to Disseminate the Accruing Knowledge

The members of the institute board collaborate with the coordinators, the Auxiliary Board members, and other experienced individuals in “a systematic and concentrated effort ... to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children’s classes, junior youth groups, and study circles”.⁸⁴ On their part, regional or national coordinators labour in the field together with cluster coordinators, converse with them on their experiences, and observe first hand the emerging strengths and challenges. Regular reflection gatherings that are informed by what is happening at the grassroots allow for a deep exploration of the unfolding experience in the region or country. The deliberations and endeavours of coordinators might for a period of time concentrate on particular sets of questions that are critical to achieving continued progress. The insights obtained from such focused efforts are then appropriately analysed and shared with others. A cluster in which significant experience is gained may in this regard be used to host gatherings of coordinators from other clusters and dispatch experienced individuals to other clusters to work with local friends in the field. This is an approach to disseminating learning that has worked well with learning sites for the junior youth programme, and it is now being applied in some form in the context of groups of adjoining clusters that are organized around one or more which can offer “a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources”.⁸⁵ Further, some institutes are also capturing lessons learned by creating documents that serve as dynamic records of efforts to address some key questions. With some of the knowledge generated globally about learning as a mode of operation now presented in Book 10, it is hoped that the study of that course will help training institutes themselves achieve even more notable advances in this capacity.

4.3 The Evolution of Organizational Schemes

Those overseeing the work of the institute in a country or region gradually grow in their understanding of how organizational schemes emerge and evolve as a cluster advances.

The overriding concern, of course, is ensuring that at every stage, a cluster is served by an appropriate arrangement and that capacity for coordination keeps pace with growth in activity. This requires that there is at the regional or national level “an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground”,⁸⁶ the basis upon which decisions with regard to coordination are then made.

In some clusters, an experienced person from another cluster is assigned to assist the friends. In others, a few local friends who are showing capacity to assist are accompanying those who have initiated core activities. In still others, coordinators are formally named, while eventually, multiple coordinators working in teams, each with a few collaborators, are raised. A regular review of the organizational arrangements in clusters and groups of clusters across the country or region, and of the mechanisms in place to provide the necessary support, is an essential aspect of the responsibilities borne at the national or regional level.

Structures at the national or regional level evolve to attend to these organizational needs of clusters. Periodic assessment should help those overseeing the institute’s work to determine in a timely manner when to reinforce or adjust whatever arrangement is in place. When to name a regional or national coordinator for each of the three educational activities; when, as activity increases, to appoint additional ones from among those gaining experience in clusters; how to build teams of friends at the regional level to help follow each programme; when to assign coordinators to work in parts of the region—are all matters that are progressively addressed. The latter point requires an additional comment. In large regions where regional coordinators are assigned to follow a number of clusters or even groups of adjoining clusters, they are increasingly operating at the level of a sub-region. As a consequence, a distinct administrative role at the regional level is emerging, and in some cases an

individual is engaged to support the coordinators operating at the sub-regional level by managing funds, distributing materials, collating statistics, and organizing reflection gatherings.

4.4 Enhancing the Capacity of the Institute Itself

As more and more clusters advance and the work of the institute increases in complexity, well-defined measures are introduced to help cluster and regional or national coordinators to grow in capability, heightening their knowledge of the Faith, their understanding of the Plan's overarching conceptual framework, and their appreciation of the nature and purpose of the institute process. Their ability to explore the reality of their region or country, to assess progress, and to plan effectively can be enhanced, and certain practical abilities such as using statistical information in reflection and planning and managing judiciously the funds of the Faith can be developed. Capacities such as building environments of cooperation and unity are also cultivated. Some of these capacities are acquired naturally through experience as coordinators are assisted to carry out their work. Institutes identify other practical means to help coordinators develop necessary abilities. For instance, individuals with relevant experience can help others; at times the institute can draw on other educational programmes of the Faith such as those offered by Bahá'í-inspired agencies; and in some cases, coordinators and others serving the institute full-time have been supported to attend relevant training programmes offered by various institutions of learning.

In addition, an institute can benefit from the contributions of other individuals with specialized skills who are involved in the general community-building work of the Faith. Examples of such skills include translating educational materials, managing finances, and documenting learning. Through ongoing assessment of the institute's evolving human resource needs and review of the measures in place to raise the capacity of the friends serving as staff or as volunteers, those overseeing the institute's work determine ways of drawing on the friends with such abilities.

4.5 Managing Effectively the Financial and Material Resources

Managing with care the financial resources pertains to all aspects and levels of the institute's operations. When they are planning and budgeting, the friends consider not only what comes from the Funds of the Faith but also what the local friends and community can offer through whatever means available to them. On their part, institute boards, in collaboration with coordinators and Auxiliary Board members, ensure that each activity at the grassroots has the required resources. In that light, effective channels for the flow of funds from the national or regional to the cluster level are put in place and simple and straightforward arrangements for maintaining accurate accounts are made. Awareness that the resources of the friends and the funds of the Faith are precious and not unlimited generates commitment to efficiency. Financial management itself is approached with an attitude of learning, and practices such as periodic budget monitoring and annual financial reporting and auditing are established.

An effective system for the production and distribution of institute materials is, of course, vital. Sometimes lack of such a system has disrupted the progress of the three educational imperatives and the vitality of the community-building process itself. Careful thought is to be given to how the materials are stored and how they are provided to each individual studying the courses so that unnecessary waste does not occur. Some institutes utilize various approaches in this regard. They ensure that cluster coordinators have access to basic storage space and that when participants can afford to purchase the texts they are encouraged to do so.

4.6 Some Administrative Aspects

4.6.1 Remuneration of institute staff

An important aspect of the management of financial resources is the remuneration of institute staff. As the number of study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups expands in a country or region, more and more people deepen their sense of ownership and desire to contribute to the betterment of society, and some among them dedicate a substantial amount of their time to the work of the institute. From among those serving as coordinators, some might require financial assistance for a period of time. There are a number of principles to be considered by institutes in this regard. Of course, capacity for coordination cannot be built by simply multiplying the number of coordinators serving full time and receiving remuneration. At the cluster level, the remuneration offered to some coordinators is essentially a short-term arrangement that is arrived at through conversation with each individual being invited to serve in this manner and requiring such assistance. Based on determined needs, factors that could be taken into consideration include "whether the person resides in a rural or urban area, is required to change residence, has a family, or intends to pursue further education".⁸⁷ While decisions made will differ from one person to another, the system will reflect an overall consistency. Additional considerations may be necessary at the regional or national level. Some of the friends serving full time and receiving remuneration might, for instance, need to continue receiving such assistance for an extended period in order to ensure that the learning processes across the entire region or country are sustained. In any case, it can be expected that whether at the cluster, regional, or national level, the needs of some individuals might sometimes "exceed what can reasonably be met by the funds of the Faith".⁸⁸ A realistic range of remuneration can be established. In creating a framework for offering remuneration to the friends, a National Spiritual Assembly, in consultation with the Counsellors and the institute board, determines what would, in general, constitute a reasonable period during which an individual serving as a cluster coordinator or as a regional or national coordinator may be provided with remuneration.

4.6.2 Managing statistics

The availability of accurate and up-to-date statistical information helps the friends overseeing the work of the training institute to "remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee".⁸⁹ The information is, of course, essential in the institute's planning and decision-making processes. A proper system for gathering and analysing statistical information requires that effective instruments are put in place for this purpose, and the Statistical Report Program (SRP) is helpful in this regard. A new version of this tool—combining its earlier versions and the Cluster Growth Profile—is already being used in many regions and clusters. Ultimately, effective management and use of statistics depends on close collaboration between cluster coordinators and Area Teaching Committees, as well as between national or regional coordinators and Regional Bahá'í Councils.

4.7 The Training Institute Board

As institutes advance as organizational structures, the role of institute boards assumes ever-greater importance. The members of an institute board are appointed by the National Spiritual Assembly or Regional Bahá'í Council, in consultation with the Counsellors, usually for a term of two to three years. Through various means, including meetings and special occasions for consultation, boards watch over the work of the institutes. They follow the unfoldment of the learning processes associated with study circles, children's classes, and junior youth groups, facilitate the formulation of vision, pay attention to the administrative matters of institutes, and liaise closely with the Counsellors and with National Assemblies or Regional Councils, as the case may be. When they are composed of individuals with the requisite experience and who are personally involved in the community-building process, and when they are able to foster effective consultative relationships with others, appreciable progress can be made in a relatively short period of time. Although all do not function in the same way and the

issues they face vary in complexity, growing demands on institutes to continue attaining higher and higher levels of functioning require that boards too become increasingly capable of carrying out their responsibilities.

Notes

[[←1](#)]

Ridván 2013 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[←2]

Message dated 12 December 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

[←3]

Ridván 2013 message.

[←4]

Ibid.

[←5]

Ibid.

[←6]

Ibid.

[←7]

Riḍván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[←8]

From an unpublished Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

[←9]

Message dated 12 December 2011.

[←10]

Ibid.

[[←11](#)]

Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[←12]

Ridván 2013 message.

[←13]

Ibid.

[←14]

Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[←15]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←16]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←17]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←18]
Ibid.

[←19]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←20]

Message dated 23 May 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[←21]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←22]

Ibid.

[←23]
Ibid.

[←24]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←25]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←26]

Ibid.

[←27]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←28]

Ibid.

[←29]
Ibid.

[←30]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←31]
Ibid.

[←32]
Ibid

[←33]

Letter dated 9 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

[←34]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←35]
Ibid.

[←36]

Message dated 27 December 2005.

[←37]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←38]
Ibid.

[←39]

39 Letter dated 14 November 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

[←40]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←41]

Ibid.

[←42]
Ibid.

[←43]

Letter dated 7 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany.

[←44]

Letter dated 23 January 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Local Spiritual Assemblies of Colombes and Courbevoie, France.

[←45]

Letter dated 9 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

[←46]

Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2009 printing), p. 206.

[←47]

Ibid., p. 195.

[←48]

Ridván 2013 message.

[←49]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←50]

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990, 1999 printing), p. 66.

[←51]

Ibid., p. 81.

[←52]

Riḍván 153 [1996] message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[←53]

Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 1992 printing), p. 223.

[←54]

Message dated 29 December 2015 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[←55]
Ibid.

[←56]
Ibid.

[←57]

Message dated 12 December 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

[←58]

Message dated 29 December 2015.

[←59]

Riḍván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.

[←60]

Ibid.

[←61]

Ibid.

[←62]

Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[←63]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←64]
Ibid.

[←65]

Message dated 29 December 2015.

[←66]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←67]
Ibid.

[←68]

Message dated 29 December 2015.

[←69]
Ibid.

[←70]
Ibid.

[←71]

Ibid.

[←72]
Ibid.

[←73]

Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

[←74]

Message dated 12 December 2011.

[←75]

“Training Institutes” (A document prepared for and approved by the Universal House of Justice, April 1998).

[←76]

Letter dated 24 December 2014 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly.

[←77]

Message dated 12 December 2011.

[←78]

Message dated 27 December 2005.

[←79]

Message dated 29 December 2015.

[←80]

Ibid.

[←81]
Ibid.

[←82]

Ridván 2010 message.

[←83]

Riḍván 1996 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Western and Central Asia.

[←84]

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[←85]
Ibid.

[←86]

Message dated 28 December 2010.

[←87]
Ibid.

[←88]

Ibid.

[←89]

Message dated 29 December 2015.