The Local Spiritual Assembly

A Compilation

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I. Establishment and Station

...The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá, and should it exceed this number it does not matter. It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth....

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932* [rev. ed.] (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980, 1998 printing), p. 21) **[1]**

Addressing the nations, the Ancient Beauty ordaineth that in every city in the world a house be established in the name of justice wherein shall gather pure and steadfast souls to the number of the Most Great Name. At this meeting they should feel as if they were entering the Presence of God, inasmuch as this binding command hath flowed from the Pen of Him Who is the Ancient of Days. The glances of God are directed towards this Assembly.

(From a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh—translated from the Persian and Arabic) **[2]**

'Abdu'l-Bahá is constantly engaged in ideal communication with any Spiritual Assembly which is instituted through the divine bounty, and the members of which, in the utmost devotion, turn to the divine Kingdom and are firm in the Covenant. To them he is whole-heartedly attached and with them he is linked by everlasting ties....

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, [rev. ed.] (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982, 2009 printing), no. 46.1) **[3]**

These Spiritual Assemblies are aided by the Spirit of God. Their defender is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Over them He spreadeth His Wings. What bounty is there greater than this? These Spiritual Assemblies are 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. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, [rev. ed.] (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987, 2012 printing), p. 526. Also published in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 38.5) **[4]**

...it is of the utmost importance that in accordance with the explicit text of the "Kitáb-i-Aqdas", the Most Holy Book, in every locality, be it city or hamlet, where the number of adult (21 years and above) declared believers exceeds nine,[1] a local "Spiritual Assembly" be *forthwith* established. To it all local matters pertaining to the Cause must be directly and immediately referred for full consultation and decision. The importance, nay the absolute necessity of these local Assemblies is

manifest when we realize that in the days to come they will evolve into the local Houses of Justice....

(From a letter dated 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan and Switzerland, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 37) **[5]**

Let us recall His explicit and often repeated assurances that every Assembly elected in that rarefied atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is in truth appointed of God, that its verdict is truly inspired, that one and all should submit to its decision unreservedly and with cheerfulness.

(From a letter dated 23 February 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 65) **[6]**

Designated as "Spiritual Assemblies"—an appellation that must in the course of time be replaced by their permanent and more descriptive title of "Houses of Justice," bestowed upon them by the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation; instituted, without any exception, in every city, town and village where nine or more adult believers are resident; annually and directly elected, on the first day of the greatest Bahá'í Festival by all adult believers, men and women alike; invested with an authority rendering them unanswerable for their acts and decisions to those who elect them; solemnly pledged to follow, under all conditions, the dictates of the "Most Great Justice" that can alone usher in the reign of the "Most Great Peace" which Bahá'u'lláh has proclaimed and must ultimately establish; charged with the responsibility of promoting at all times the best interests of the communities within their jurisdiction, of familiarizing them with their plans and activities and of inviting them to offer any recommendations they might wish to make; cognizant of their no less vital task of demonstrating, through association with all liberal and humanitarian movements, the universality and comprehensiveness of their Faith; dissociated entirely from all sectarian organizations, whether religious or secular; assisted by committees annually appointed by, and directly responsible to, them, to each of which a particular branch of Bahá'í activity is assigned for study and action; supported by local funds to which all believers voluntarily contribute; these Assemblies, the representatives and custodians of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, numbering at the present time, several hundred, and whose membership is drawn from the diversified races, creeds and classes constituting the world-wide Bahá'í community, have, in the course of the last two decades, abundantly demonstrated, by virtue of their achievements, their right to be regarded as the chief sinews of Bahá'í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure.

(Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 524–525) **[7]**

That the Spiritual Assemblies of today will be replaced in time by the Houses of Justice, and are to all intents and purposes identical and not separate bodies, is abundantly confirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself. He has in fact in a Tablet addressed to the members of the first Chicago Spiritual Assembly, the first elected Bahá'í body instituted in the United States, referred to them as the members of the "House of Justice" for that city, and has thus with His own pen established beyond any doubt the identity of the present Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies with the Houses of Justice referred to by Bahá'u'lláh. For reasons which are not difficult to discover, it has been found advisable to bestow upon the elected representatives of Bahá'í communities throughout the world the temporary appellation of Spiritual Assemblies, a term which, as the position and aims of the Bahá'í Faith are better understood and more fully recognized, will gradually be superseded by the permanent and more appropriate designation of House of Justice....

(Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, [2nd rev. ed.] (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982, 2012 printing) p. 6) **[8]**

II. Membership—Qualifications and Election

If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies ... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. Hence it is incumbent upon the chosen delegates to consider without the least trace of passion and prejudice, and irrespective of any material consideration, the names of only those who can best combine the necessary qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience....

(From a letter dated 3 June 1925 written by Shoghi Effendi to the delegates and visitors at the convention of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 88) **[9]**

With reference to your next question concerning the qualifications of the members of the Spiritual Assembly: there is a distinction of fundamental importance which should be always remembered in this connection, and this is between the Spiritual Assembly as an institution, and the persons who compose it. These are by no means supposed to be perfect, nor can they be considered as being *inherently* superior to the rest of their fellow-believers. It is precisely because they are subject to the same human limitations that characterize the other members of the community that they have to be elected every year. The existence of elections is a sufficient indication that Assembly members, though forming part of an institution that is divine and perfect, are nevertheless themselves imperfect. But this does not necessarily imply that their judgement is defective. For as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has repeatedly emphasized Bahá'í Assemblies are under the guidance and protection of God. The elections, especially when annual, give the community a good opportunity to remedy any defect or imperfection from which the Assembly may suffer as a result of the actions of its members. Thus a safe method has been established whereby the quality of membership in Bahá'í Assemblies can be continually raised and improved. But, as already stated, the institution of the Spiritual Assembly should under no circumstances be identified with, or be estimated merely through, the personal qualifications of the members that compose it.

(From a letter dated 15 November 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two believers) **[10]**

...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. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others, of canvassing for any particular individual, but should stress the necessity of getting fully acquainted with the qualifications of membership referred to in our Beloved's Tablets and of learning more about one another through direct, personal experience rather than through the reports and opinions of our friends.

(From a letter dated 14 May 1927 written by Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly, published in *Bahá'í News* (18 June 1927), p. 9) **[11]**

These local Spiritual Assemblies will have to be elected directly by the friends, and every declared believer of 21 years and above, far from standing aloof and assuming an indifferent or independent attitude, should regard it his sacred duty to take part, conscientiously and diligently, in the election, the consolidation, and the efficient working of his own local Assembly.

(From a letter dated 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 39) **[12]**

...the elector ... is called upon to vote for none but those whom prayer and reflection have inspired him to uphold. ...the practice of nomination, so detrimental to the atmosphere of a silent and prayerful election, is viewed with mistrust inasmuch as it gives the right to the majority of a body that, in itself, under the present circumstances, often constitutes a minority of all the elected delegates, to deny that God-given right of every elector to vote only in favour of those whom he is conscientiously convinced are the most worthy candidates....

(From a letter dated 27 May 1927 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 136) **[13]**

III. Taking Counsel Together—Functions

It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly. Thus hath the Lord your God ... commanded you. Beware lest ye put away that which is clearly revealed in His Tablet. Fear God, O ye that perceive!

(Bahá'u'lláh, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 21) **[14]**

Once in session, it behoveth them to converse, on behalf of God's servants, upon the affairs and interests of all. They should, for instance, accord precedence to the teaching of the Cause, inasmuch as it is a matter of supreme importance, so that all people, even as a single soul, may enter within the Tabernacle of divine Unity, and all humanity may become even as a single body. In like manner, they should consider such matters as the refinement of manners, the preservation of human dignity, the development of cities, and the polity which God hath made a bulwark for His lands and a fortress for His people.

The teaching of the Cause of God should be considered with a view to what, in the particular conditions of each time and age, is most conducive to its advancement and, similarly, other matters; whatever is then decided upon should be carried into effect. Care, however, should be taken lest aught be implemented contrary to that which hath been sent down in the divine verses in this Revelation of imperishable glory. For whatsoever the one true God—exalted be His glory!—hath prescribed unto His servants, the same is to their best advantage. He, verily, is kinder to you than ye are to yourselves; He, verily, is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed.

Should these souls comply with the prescribed conditions, they shall assuredly be aided through His invisible bestowals. This, truly, is an undertaking whose benefit embraceth all.

(From a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh—translated from the Persian and Arabic) **[15]**

The prime requisites for them that take counsel together are purity of motive, radiance of spirit, detachment from all else save God, attraction to His Divine Fragrances, humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones, patience and long-suffering in difficulties and servitude to His exalted Threshold. Should they be graciously aided to acquire these attributes, victory from the unseen Kingdom of Bahá shall be vouchsafed to them. In this day, assemblies of consultation are of the greatest importance and a vital necessity. Obedience unto them is essential and obligatory. The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his

own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. If after discussion a decision be carried unanimously, well and good; but if, the Lord forbid, differences of opinion should arise, a majority of voices must prevail.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 21–22. Also published in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, nos. 43.1 and 44.1) **[16]**

...Whenever ye enter the council-chamber, recite this prayer with a heart throbbing with the love of God and a tongue purified from all but His remembrance, that the All-Powerful may graciously aid you to achieve supreme victory: "O God, my God! We are servants of Thine that have turned with devotion to Thy Holy Face, that have detached ourselves from all beside Thee in this glorious Day. We have gathered in this spiritual assembly, united in our views and thoughts, with our purposes harmonized to exalt Thy Word amidst mankind. O Lord, our God! Make us the signs of Thy divine Guidance, the Standards of Thy exalted Faith amongst men, servants to Thy mighty Covenant, O Thou our Lord Most High! Manifestations of Thy Divine Unity in Thine Abhá Kingdom, and resplendent stars shining upon all regions. Lord! Aid us to become seas surging with the billows of Thy wondrous Grace, streams flowing from Thy all-glorious Heights, goodly fruits upon the Tree of Thy heavenly Cause, trees waving through the breezes of Thy Bounty in Thy celestial Vineyard. O God! Make our souls dependent upon the Verses of Thy Divine Unity, our hearts cheered with the outpourings of Thy Grace, that we may unite even as the waves of one sea and become merged together as the rays of Thine effulgent Light; that our thoughts, our views, our feelings may become as one reality, manifesting the spirit of union throughout the world. Thou art the Gracious, the Bountiful, the Bestower, the Almighty, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 20–21. Also published in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, nos. 42.4 and 42.5) **[17]**

...The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly freed from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be non-existent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition: They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority. It is again not permitted that any one of the honoured members object to or censure, whether in or out of the meeting, any decision arrived at previously though that decision be not right, for such criticism would prevent any decision from being enforced. In short, whatsoever thing is arranged in harmony and with love and purity of motive, its result is light, and should the least trace of estrangement prevail the result shall be darkness upon darkness.... If this be so regarded, that assembly shall be of God, but otherwise it shall lead to coolness and alienation that proceed from the Evil One....

('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 22.) **[18]**

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. Should they endeavour to fulfil these conditions the Grace of the Holy Spirit shall be vouchsafed unto them, and that assembly shall become the centre of the Divine blessings, the hosts of Divine confirmation shall come to their aid, and they shall day by day receive a new effusion of Spirit.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 22–23) **[19]**

A perusal of some of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the duties and functions of the Spiritual Assemblies in every land (later to be designated as the local Houses of Justice) emphatically reveals the sacredness of their nature, the wide scope of their activity, and the grave responsibility which rests upon them.

...

The matter of Teaching, its direction, its ways and means, its extension, its consolidation, essential as they are to the interests of the Cause, constitute by no means the only issue which should receive the full attention of these Assemblies. A careful study of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets will reveal that other duties, no less vital to the interests of the Cause, devolve upon the elected representatives of the friends in every locality.

It is incumbent upon them to be vigilant and cautious, discreet and watchful, and protect at all times the Temple of the Cause from the dart of the mischief-maker and the onslaught of the enemy.

They must endeavour to promote amity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and whole-hearted cooperation for the service of the Cause.

They must do their utmost to extend at all times the helping hand to the poor, the sick, the disabled, the orphan, the widow, irrespective of colour, caste and creed.

They must promote by every means in their power the material as well as the spiritual enlightenment of youth, the means for the education of children, institute, whenever possible, Bahá'í educational institutions, organize and supervise their work and provide the best means for their progress and development.

...

They must undertake the arrangement of the regular meetings of the friends, the feasts and the anniversaries, as well as the special gatherings designed to serve and promote the social, intellectual and spiritual interests of their fellow-men.

...

These rank among the most outstanding obligations of the members of every Spiritual Assembly....

(The first paragraph is from a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 20. The rest is from a letter dated 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan and Switzerland, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 37–39) **[20]**

...he feels that you should turn to your Local Assembly, in the strictest confidence, and seek their aid and advice. These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect, and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to—indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and unity and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers.

You should go to them as a child would to its parents...

(From a letter dated 28 September 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[21]**

Bahá'u'lláh has given the promise that in every Assembly where unity and harmony prevail, there His glorious spirit will not only be present, but will animate, sustain and guide all the friends in all their deliberations.

It is to unity that the Guardian has been continually calling the friends. For where a united will exists, nothing can effectively oppose and hamper the forces of constructive development.

(From a letter dated 17 November 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Local Spiritual Assemblies of Evanston and Wilmette, U.S.A., published in *Bahá'í News* 190 (December 1946), p. 1) **[22]**

The members of these Assemblies, on their part, 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.

(From a letter dated 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan and Switzerland, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 41) **[23]**

Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views....

...

And when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after dispassionate, anxious, and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer, and with earnestness and conviction and courage record their vote and abide by the voice of the majority, which we are told by our Master to be the voice of truth, never to be challenged, and always to be whole-heartedly enforced. To this voice the friends must heartily respond, and regard it as the only means that can ensure the protection and advancement of the Cause.

(From a letter dated 23 February 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 63–64) **[24]**

Bahá'ís are not required to vote on an Assembly against their consciences. It is better if they submit to the majority view and make it unanimous. But they are not forced to. What they must do, however, is to abide by the majority decision, as this is what becomes effective. They must not

go around undermining the Assembly by saying they disagreed with the majority. In other words, they must put the Cause first and not their own opinions. He (a Spiritual Assembly member) can ask the Assembly to reconsider a matter, but he has no right to force them or create inharmony because they won't change. Unanimous votes are preferable, but certainly cannot be forced upon Assembly members by artificial methods such as are used by other societies.

(From a letter dated 19 October 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, published in *Bahá'í News* 202 (December 1947), p. 3) **[25]**

But before the majority of the Assembly comes to a decision, it is not only the right but the sacred obligation of every member to express freely and openly his views, without being afraid of displeasing or alienating any of his fellow-members. In view of this important administrative principle of frank and open consultation, the Guardian would advise you to give up the method of asking other members to voice your opinion and suggestions. This indirect way of expressing your views to the Assembly not only creates an atmosphere of secrecy which is most alien to the spirit of the Cause, but would also lead to many misunderstandings and complications. The Assembly members must have the courage of their convictions, but must also express whole-hearted and unqualified obedience to the well-considered judgement and directions of the majority of their fellow-members.

(From a letter dated 28 October 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[26]**

The friends should therefore not feel discouraged at the differences of opinion that may prevail among the members of an Assembly, for these, as experience has shown, and as the Master's words attest, fulfil a valuable function in all Assembly deliberations. But once the opinion of the majority has been ascertained, all the members should automatically and unreservedly obey it, and faithfully carry it out. Patience and restraint, however, should at all times characterize the discussions and deliberations of the elected representatives of the local community, and no fruitless and hair-splitting discussions indulged in, under any circumstances.

(From a letter dated 18 April 1939 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[27]**

There is only one principle on which to conduct the work of an Assembly, and that is the supremacy of the will of the majority. The majority decisions must be courageously adopted and carried out by the Assembly, quite regardless of the opinionated adherence to their own views which any minority may cling to.

(From a letter dated 20 November 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[28]**

He ... pointed out to them that the attitude of "all for one and one for all" was very incorrect. An Assembly constitutes within its area of jurisdiction the Trustees of the Faith. Its members must at *all times* put the interests of the Faith above personality and impartially go into any matter brought to its attention. Theoretically it is always possible for a member of an Assembly to be unworthy or insincere. To take the attitude that any blame cast upon or any charge made against an Assembly member is a charge against the body itself is very wrong. An Assembly must protect the Faith and neither blindly accuse nor blindly defend one of its members....

The Bahá'ís must learn to forget personalities and to overcome the desire—so natural in people—to take sides and fight about it. They must also learn to really make use of the great principle of consultation. There is a time set aside at the Nineteen Day Feasts for the Community to express its views and make suggestions to its Assembly; the Assembly and the believers should look forward to this happy period of discussion, and neither fear it nor suppress it. Likewise the

Assembly members should fully consult, and in their decisions put the interests of the Cause first and not personalities, the will of the majority prevailing.

... One of the healing remedies Bahá'u'lláh has given to a sick world is the Assembly (which in future will become a House of Justice); its members have very sacred and heavy responsibilities, its power to steer the Community, to protect and assist its members is likewise very great.

(From a letter dated 30 June 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria, published in *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria*, vol. 1 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1982), pp. 152–153) **[29]**

IV. Attendance and Resignation

...it is only too obvious that unless a member can attend regularly the meetings of his Local Assembly, it would be impossible for him to discharge the duties incumbent upon him, and to fulfil his responsibilities, as a representative of the community. Membership in a Local Spiritual Assembly carries with it, indeed, the obligation and capacity to remain in close touch with local Bahá'í activities, and the ability to attend regularly the sessions of the Assembly.

(From a letter dated 16 February 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration: A Compilation*, 1st Indian ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 51) **[30]**

...it is establishing a dangerous precedent to allow Assemblies to put a time limit on non-attendance of their members at meetings of the S.A., beyond which that person is automatically dropped from the Assembly and a vacancy declared... There should be no time limit fixed by Assemblies beyond which a person is dropped. Every case of prolonged absence from the sessions of the Assembly should be considered separately by that Assembly, and if the person is seen to not want to attend meetings, or to be held away from them indefinitely because of illness or travel, then a vacancy could legitimately be declared and a new member be elected.

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, published in *Bahá'í News* 208 (June 1948), p. 7) **[31]**

With reference to your question whether it would be permissible for a believer to resign from the Local Assembly: under special circumstances, such as illness, one may do so, but only after, and never before, one has been elected to the membership of the Assembly. Personal differences and disagreements among Assembly members surely afford no sufficient ground for such resignation, and certainly can not justify absence from Assembly meetings. Through the clash of personal opinions, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated, the spark of truth is often ignited, and Divine guidance revealed....

(From a letter dated 18 April 1939 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[32]**

The remedy to Assembly inharmony cannot be in the resignation or abstinence of any of its members. It must learn, in spite of disturbing elements, to continue to function as a whole, otherwise the whole system would become discredited through the introduction of exceptions to the rule.

(From a letter dated 20 November 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[33]**

V. Assembly—Relation to Believers

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority, but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand and fellowship, candour and courage on the other.

The duties of those whom the friends have freely and conscientiously elected as their representatives are no less vital and binding than the obligations of those who have chosen them. 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. They must regard themselves in no other light but that of chosen instruments for a more efficient and dignified presentation of the Cause of God. They should never 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. They should approach their task with extreme humility, 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 should serve, but also their esteem and real affection. They must at all times avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel....

(From a letter dated 23 February 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, pp. 63–64) **[34]**

The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers. Otherwise the more competent members of the group will go at a tangent and try to find elsewhere a field of work and where they could use their energy.

Shoghi Effendi hopes that the Assemblies will do their utmost in planning such teaching activities that every single soul will be kept busy.

(From a letter dated 30 August 1930 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada) **[35]**

The administrators of the Faith of God must be like unto shepherds. Their aim should be to dispel all the doubts, misunderstandings and harmful differences which may arise in the community of the believers. And this they can adequately achieve provided they are motivated by a true sense of love for their fellow-brethren coupled with a firm determination to act with justice in all the cases which are submitted to them for their consideration.

(From a letter dated 9 March 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[36]**

There is no task more urgently necessary than the assurance of perfect harmony and fellowship among the friends, especially between the Local Assemblies and individual believers. The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly. The two must learn to co-operate, and to realize that only through such a cooperation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function. While obedience to the Local Assembly should be unqualified and whole-hearted, yet that body should enforce its decisions in

such a way as to avoid giving the impression that it is animated by dictatorial motives. The spirit of the Cause is one of mutual co-operation, and not that of a dictatorship.

(From a letter dated 28 October 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[37]**

VI. Believers—Relation to Assembly

...It is incumbent upon everyone not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it, that things may be properly ordered and well arranged. Otherwise every person will act independently and after his own judgement, will follow his own desire, and do harm to the Cause.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932* p. 21) **[38]**

...all matters without any exception whatsoever, regarding the interests of the Cause in ... [a] locality, individually or collectively, should be referred exclusively to the Spiritual Assembly in that locality, which shall decide upon it, unless it be a matter of national interest, in which case it shall be referred to the National Body....

(From a letter dated 5 March 1922 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 23) **[39]**

In order to avoid division and disruption, that the Cause may not fall a prey to conflicting interpretations, and lose thereby its purity and pristine vigour, that its affairs may be conducted with efficiency and promptness, it is necessary that everyone should conscientiously take an active part in the election of these Assemblies, abide by their decision, enforce their decree, and co-operate with them whole-heartedly in their task of stimulating the growth of the Movement throughout all regions....

(From a letter dated 12 March 1923 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America, Australasia, France, Germany, British Isles, Italy, Japan and Switzerland, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 41) **[40]**

I fully approve and whole-heartedly and unreservedly uphold the principle to which you refer that personalities should not be made centres around which the community may revolve, but that they should be subordinated under all conditions and however great their merits to the properly constituted Assemblies. You and your co-workers can never overestimate or overemphasize this cardinal principle of Bahá'í Administration.

(From a letter dated 11 April 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration: A Compilation*, p. 58) **[41]**

Regarding the principle that the Cause must not be allowed to centre around any Bahá'í personality, the Guardian wishes to make it clear that it was never intended that well-qualified individual teachers should not receive from Local Assemblies every encouragement and facilities to address the public. What the Guardian meant was that the personality and the popularity of such a speaker should never be allowed to eclipse the authority, or detract from the influence, of the body of the elected representatives in every local community. Such an individual should not only seek the approval, advice and assistance of the body that represents the Cause in his locality, but should strive to attribute any credit he may obtain to the collective wisdom and capacity of

the Assembly under whose jurisdiction he performs his services. Assemblies and not individuals constitute the bedrock on which the Administration is built. Everything else must be subordinated to, and be made to serve and advance the best interests of, these elected custodians and promoters of the Law of Bahá'u'lláh.

(From a letter dated 12 August 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, published in *Principles of Bahá'í Administration: A Compilation*, p. 19) **[42]**

Regarding consultation: Any person can refer a matter to the Assembly for consultation whether the other party wishes to or not. In matters which affect the Cause the Assembly should, if it deems it necessary, intervene even if both sides don't want it to, because the whole purpose of the Assemblies is to protect the Faith, the Communities and the individual Bahá'ís as well.

(From a letter dated 17 October 1944 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, published in *Bahá'í News* 177 (November 1945), p. 2) **[43]**

The believers should learn to turn more often to their Assemblies for advice and help and at an earlier date, and the Assemblies, on the other hand, should act with more vigilance and a greater sense of Community responsibility towards every situation that may damage the prestige of the Faith in the eyes of the public. When decisions have been reached by the Assembly, they must be carried out loyally and willingly by all concerned.

(From a letter dated 13 March 1944 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[44]**

One of the fundamentals involved in our Administrative Order, which we must remember will become the pattern for our World Order, is that even if an Assembly makes an ill-advised decision it must be upheld in order to preserve the unity of the Community. Appeal can be made from the Local Assembly's decision to the National Assembly.... But the principle of authority invested in our elected bodies must be upheld. This is not something which can be learned without trial and test....

(From a letter dated 30 June 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany and Austria, published in *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of Germany and Austria*, vol. 1, p. 151) **[45]**

The believers should have confidence in the directions and orders of their Assembly, even though they may not be convinced of their justice or right. Once the Assembly, through a majority vote of its members, comes to a decision the friends should readily obey it. Specially those dissenting members within the Assembly whose opinion is contrary to that of the majority of their fellow-members should set a good example before the community by sacrificing their personal views for the sake of obeying the principle of majority vote that underlies the functioning of all Bahá'í Assemblies.

(From a letter dated 28 October 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[46]**

The Assembly may make a mistake, but, as the Master pointed out, if the Community does not abide by its decisions, or the individual Bahá'í, the result is worse, as it undermines the very institution which must be *strengthened* in order to uphold the principles and laws of the Faith. He tells us God will right the wrongs done. We must have confidence in this and obey our Assemblies. He therefore strongly urges you to work directly under your Bahá'í Assembly, to accept your responsibilities as a voting member, and do your utmost to create harmony within the community.

(From letter dated 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[47]**

What the Master desired to protect the friends against was continual bickering and opinionatedness. A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Bahá'í must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony—even if a mistake has been made—are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Bahá'í way, God will right any wrongs done in the end.

(From a letter dated 19 October 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[48]**

Just as the individual believers are bound to support and sustain their Local Assembly, for the preservation of the unity of the Faith and the strengthening of its as yet embryonic World Order, so must the Local Assemblies obey and sustain their national representatives. The closer the co-operation between Local and National Assemblies, the greater will be the power and radiance which can and must stream forth from these institutions to the suffering ranks of humanity.

(From a letter dated 29 July 1942 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the Local Spiritual Assembly of Bombay) **[49]**

VII. Prospects of the Future

The administrative machinery of the Cause having now sufficiently evolved, its aim and object fairly well grasped and understood, and its method and working made more familiar to every believer, I feel the time is ripe when it should be fully and consciously utilized to further the purpose for which it has been created. It should, I strongly feel, be made to serve a twofold purpose. On one hand, it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion of the Movement along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal; and on the other, it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved....

(From a letter dated 11 May 1926 written by Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, p. 109) **[50]**

The friends must never mistake the Bahá'í administration for an end in itself. It is merely the instrument of the spirit of the Faith. This Cause is a Cause which God has revealed to humanity as a whole. It is designed to benefit the entire human race, and the only way it can do this is to reform the community life of mankind, as well as seeking to regenerate the individual. The Bahá'í Administration is only the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living. As yet the believers are only just beginning to grasp and practise it properly. So we must have patience if at times it seems a little self-conscious and rigid in its workings. It is because we are learning something very difficult but very wonderful—how to live together as a community of Bahá'ís, according to the glorious teachings.

(From a letter dated 14 October 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two believers) **[51]**

Ours, dearly-beloved co-workers, is the paramount duty to continue, with undimmed vision and unabated zeal, to assist in the final erection of that Edifice the foundations of which Bahá'u'lláh has laid in our hearts, to derive added hope and strength from the general trend of recent events, however dark their immediate effects, and to pray with unremitting fervour that He may hasten the approach of the realization of that Wondrous Vision which constitutes the

brightest emanation of His Mind and the fairest fruit of the fairest civilization the world has yet seen.

(From a letter dated 28 November 1931 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, p. 48) **[52]**

And now as I look into the future, I hope to see the friends at all times, in every land, and of every shade of thought and character, voluntarily and joyously rallying round their local and in particular their national centres of activity, upholding and promoting their interests with complete unanimity and contentment, with perfect understanding, genuine enthusiasm, and sustained vigour. This indeed is the one joy and yearning of my life, for it is the fountainhead from which all future blessings will flow, the broad foundation upon which the security of the Divine Edifice must ultimately rest....

(From a letter dated 24 September 1924 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of America) **[53]**

Notes

1 When the number of believers is exactly nine, they constitute themselves as the Local Spiritual Assembly by joint declaration. ↩

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