The National Spiritual Assembly

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A Pivotal Instrument of the Administrative Order

The Administrative Order: Nucleus and Pattern of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh

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.

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, par. 181) **[1]**

It should be remembered by every follower of the Cause that the system of Bahá'í administration is not an innovation imposed arbitrarily upon the Bahá'ís of the world since the Master's passing, but derives its authority from the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is specifically prescribed in unnumbered Tablets, and rests in some of its essential features upon the explicit provisions of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. It thus unifies and correlates the principles separately laid down by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and is indissolubly bound with the essential verities of the Faith. To dissociate the administrative principles of the Cause from the purely spiritual and humanitarian teachings would be tantamount to a mutilation of the body of the Cause, a separation that can only result in the disintegration of its component parts, and the extinction of the Faith itself.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 27 February 1929, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p. 5) **[2]**

The Administrative Order which lies embedded in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and which the American believers have championed and are now establishing, should, under no circumstances, be identified with the principles underlying present-day democracies. Nor is it identical with any purely aristocratic or autocratic form of government. The objectionable features inherent in each of these political systems are entirely avoided. It blends, as no system of human polity has as yet achieved, those salutary truths and beneficial elements which constitute the valuable contributions which each of these forms of government have made to society in the past. Consultation, frank and unfettered, is the bedrock of this unique Order. Authority is concentrated in the hands of the elected members of the National Assembly. Power and initiative are primarily vested in the entire body of the believers acting through their local representatives. To generate those forces which must give birth to the body of their national administrators, and to confer, freely and fully and at fixed intervals, with both the incoming and outgoing National Assemblies, are the twofold functions, the supreme responsibility and sole prerogative of the delegates assembled in Convention. Nothing short of close and constant interaction between these various organs of Bahá'í administration can enable it to fulfil its high destiny.

(From a postscript by Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 18 November 1933 written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[3]**

Dearly-beloved friends! The onrushing forces so miraculously released through the agency of two independent and swiftly successive Manifestations are now under our very eyes and through the care of the chosen stewards of a far-flung Faith being gradually mustered and disciplined. They are slowly crystallizing into institutions that will come to be regarded as the hall-mark and glory of the age we are called upon to establish and by our deeds immortalize. For upon our present-day efforts, and above all upon the extent to which we strive to remodel our lives after the pattern of sublime heroism associated with those gone before us, must depend the efficacy of the instruments we now fashion—instruments that must erect the structure of that blissful Commonwealth which must signalize the Golden Age of our Faith.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 8 February 1934, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 98) **[4]**

Let no one, while this System is still in its infancy, misconceive its character, belittle its significance or misrepresent its purpose. The bedrock on which this Administrative Order is founded is God's immutable Purpose for mankind in this day. The Source from which it derives its inspiration is no one less than Bahá'u'lláh Himself. Its shield and defender are the embattled hosts of the Abhá Kingdom.... The pillars that sustain its authority and buttress its structure are the twin institutions of the Guardianship and of the Universal House of Justice. The central, the underlying aim which animates it is the establishment of the New World Order as adumbrated by Bahá'u'lláh. The methods it employs, the standard it inculcates, incline it to neither East nor West, neither Jew nor Gentile, neither rich nor poor, neither white nor colored. Its watchword is the unification of the human race; its standard the "Most Great Peace"; its consummation the advent of that golden millennium—the Day when the kingdoms of this world shall have become the Kingdom of God Himself, the Kingdom of Bahá'u'lláh.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 8 February 1934, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 156–157) **[5]**

In emphasizing its distinctiveness, Shoghi Effendi has pointed out that "this Administrative Order is fundamentally different from anything that any Prophet has previously established, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh has Himself revealed its principles, established its institutions, appointed

the person to interpret His Word and conferred the necessary authority on the body designed to supplement and apply His legislative ordinances." In another statement, he maintains that "It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men, at various periods of their history, have contrived for the government of human institutions." "Such an attempt," he felt, "would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author."

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 29 December 1988 to the Bahá'ís of the United States of America) **[6]**

The situation in the world, while presenting us with an acute challenge of the utmost urgency, calls to mind the encouraging global vision of Shoghi Effendi for the prospects of the Administrative Order during the second century of the Bahá'í Era, whose midpoint we are rapidly approaching. In 1946, he wrote: "The second century is destined to witness a tremendous deployment and a notable consolidation of the forces working towards the worldwide development of that Order, as well as the first stirrings of that World Order, of which the present Administrative System is at once the precursor, the nucleus and pattern—an Order which, as it slowly crystallizes and radiates its benign influence over the entire planet, will proclaim at once the coming of age of the whole human race, as well as the maturity of the Faith itself, the progenitor of that Order."

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1992 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[7]**

From the dawn of Bahá'í history, attention has been directed to the glory of the World Order which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is destined to unfold. The Báb Himself declared, "Well is it with him who fixeth his gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh and rendereth thanks unto his Lord!" while Bahá'u'lláh affirmed, in the Mother Book of His Dispensation, that "the world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order". It is abundantly evident that the exalted aims of the Faith can be accomplished only through the instrumentality of the World Order which Bahá'u'lláh has established for that purpose. The spiritual transformation of humanity, the relief of the diverse peoples of the earth from rampant suffering, the attainment and preservation of true peace in the world, the birth of a world civilization—all such noble objectives of the Cause of God will remain unrealized unless they are associated with that radical change in the structure and functioning of human society inherent in the growth and fruition of His divinely ordained Order. The institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, now being raised in all parts of the world through the endeavours of the believers, are the precursor, the nucleus and the pattern of that World Order which will, in the course of time, exert its full benevolent influence on all the peoples of the earth.

Shoghi Effendi explained that the revelation by Bahá'u'lláh of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas "preserves for posterity the basic laws and ordinances on which the fabric of His future World Order must rest." And he referred to "the triple impulse generated through the revelation of the Tablet of Carmel by Bahá'u'lláh and the Will and Testament as well as the Tablets of the Divine Plan bequeathed by the Centre of His Covenant—the three Charters which have set in motion three distinct processes, the first operating in the Holy Land for the development of the institutions of the Faith at its World Centre and the other two, throughout the rest of the Bahá'í world, for its propagation and the establishment of its Administrative Order." These three processes, although distinct, are closely interrelated. Developments at the World Centre of the Faith, the heart and nerve-centre of the Administrative Order, must necessarily exert a pronounced influence on the organic body of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and be affected by its vitality. The Administrative Order may best be viewed as the chief instrument for the prosecution of the Divine Plan, while that Plan has become recognized as the most potent agency for the development of the administrative structure of the Faith. It follows that, for the sound and balanced growth of the Faith and the speedy attainment of world order, due attention must be paid to all three processes.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 4 January 1994 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[8]**

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."

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 25 March 2007 to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[9]**

Role of the National Spiritual Assembly

The Spiritual Assemblies to be established in this Age of God, this holy century, have, it is indisputable, had neither peer nor likeness in the cycles gone before. For those assemblages that wielded power were based on the support of mighty leaders of men, while these Assemblies are based on the support of the Beauty of Abhá. The defenders and patrons of those other assemblages were either a prince, or a king, or a chief priest, or the mass of the people. But these Spiritual Assemblies have for their defender, their supporter, their helper, their inspirer, the omnipotent Lord.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, par. 40.2) **[10]**

Designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Will as the "*Secondary Houses of Justice*," they constitute the electoral bodies in the formation of the International House of Justice, and are empowered to direct, unify, coordinate and stimulate the activities of individuals as well as local Assemblies within their jurisdiction. Resting on the broad base of organized local communities, themselves pillars sustaining the institution which must be regarded as the apex of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, these Assemblies are elected, according to the principle of proportional representation, by delegates representative of Bahá'í local communities assembled at Convention during the period of the Riḍván Festival; are possessed of the necessary authority to enable them to insure the harmonious and efficient development of Bahá'í activity within their respective spheres; are freed from all direct responsibility for their policies and decisions to their electorates; are charged with the sacred duty of consulting the views, of inviting the recommendations and of securing the confidence and cooperation of the delegates and of acquainting them with their plans, problems and actions; and are supported by the resources of national funds to which all ranks of the faithful are urged to contribute.

(Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 527) **[11]**

It would be impossible at this stage to ignore the indispensability or to overestimate the unique significance of the institution of the National Spiritual Assembly—the pivot round which revolve the activities of the believers throughout the American continent. Supreme is their

position, grave their responsibilities, manifold and arduous their duties. How great the privilege, how delicate the task of the assembled delegates whose function it is to elect such national representatives as would by their record of service ennoble and enrich the annals of the Cause! If we but turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies, as enumerated in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets, 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. May the incoming National Spiritual Assembly—the privileged and chosen servants of the Cause—immortalize their term of stewardship by deeds of loving service, deeds that will redound to the honour, the glory and the power of the Most Great Name.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 3 June 1925, in *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922–1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 87–88) **[12]**

As to the National Assembly, whose inescapable responsibility is to guard the integrity, coordinate the activities, and stimulate the life, of the entire community, its chief concern, at the present moment, should be to anxiously deliberate on how best to enable both individual believers and Local Assemblies to fulfill their respective tasks. Through their repeated appeals, through their readiness to dispel all misunderstandings and remove all obstacles, through the example of their lives, their unrelaxing vigilance, their high sense of justice, their humility, consecration and courage, they must demonstrate to those whom they represent their capacity to play their part in the progress of the Plan in which they, no less than the rest of the community, are involved. May the all-conquering Spirit of Bahá'u'lláh be so infused into each component part of this harmoniously functioning System as to enable it to contribute its proper share to the consummation of the Plan.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 30 January 1938, in *This Decisive Hour: Messages from Shoghi Effendi to the North American Bahá'ís, 1932–1946*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2002), no. 36) **[13]**

As the process of internal expansion and consolidation gains momentum, the elected national representatives of this Community must not fail to consecrate themselves to the no less fundamental task of enriching continually the spiritual life of its members, of deepening their understanding of the essential verities, tenets and principles underlying their Faith, of demanding a strict adherence to its laws and statutes, and of setting an example to their fellow-believers through a fuller reflection, in their personal lives and conduct, of the ennobling truths animating the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 24 June 1954 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[14]**

The purpose of the administration at this time is to blow on the fire newly kindled in the hearts of these people who have accepted the Faith, to create in them the desire and capacity to teach, to facilitate the pioneer and teaching work, and help deepen the knowledge and understanding of the friends.

(From a letter dated 15 July 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[15]**

Like a wise and loving parent the Assembly should conduct the affairs of the Bahá'ís, constantly and patiently, encouraging them and instilling enthusiasm for the work to be done.

(From a letter dated 29 July 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to five National Spiritual Assemblies) **[16]**

One of the purposes of the structure provided by the institutions of the Administrative Order is to facilitate the flow of guidance, information, and funds—between the institutions themselves but often between individuals or groups and the institutions. It is true that the flow of each of these, most notably the flow of information that takes place in everyday conversation, can occur through informal means; yet all require formal systems and instruments, some of which are highly structured, such as an accounting system or a statistical report, and others of which are less so, for instance, a meeting called to address a particular issue or an assignment given to a secretary to carry out on behalf of a body.

(From a letter dated 24 June 2010 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[17]**

An Ethos of Loving Service

Let it be made clear to every inquiring reader that among the most outstanding and sacred duties incumbent upon those who have been called upon to initiate, direct and co-ordinate the affairs of the Cause are those that require them to win by every means in their power the confidence and affection of those whom it is their privilege to serve. Theirs is the duty to investigate and acquaint themselves with the considered views, the prevailing sentiments, the personal convictions of those whose welfare it is their solemn obligation to promote. Theirs is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short from every word and deed that might savour of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant member of the Bahá'í Family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the spirit of individual initiative and enterprise, and fortify the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all Local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 18 October 1927, in *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 143–144) **[18]**

Administrative efficiency and order should always be accompanied by an equal degree of love, of devotion and of spiritual development. Both of them are essential and to attempt to dissociate one from the other is to deaden the body of the Cause. In these days, when the Faith is still in its infancy, great care must be taken lest mere administrative routine stifles the spirit which must feed the body of the Administration itself. That spirit is its propelling force and the motivating power of its very life.

But as already emphasized, both the spirit and the form are essential to the safe and speedy development of the Administration. To maintain full balance between them is the main and unique responsibility of the administrators of the Cause.

(From a letter dated 10 December 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[19]**

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 practice 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, in *Messages to the Antipodes: Communications from Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í Communities of Australasia*, (Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1997), p. 175) **[20]**

Contemplating Bahá'u'lláh's warning that "whatsoever passeth beyond the limits of moderation will cease to exert a beneficial influence," we come to appreciate that the Administrative Order He has conceived embodies the operating principles which are necessary to the maintenance of that moderation which will ensure the "true liberty" of humankind. All things considered, does the Administrative Order not appear to be the structure of freedom for our Age? 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers us comfort in this thought, for He has said that "the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the universal relationships is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh."

Within this framework of freedom a pattern is set for institutional and individual behaviour which depends for its efficacy not so much on the force of law, which admittedly must be respected, as on the recognition of a mutuality of benefits, and on the spirit of cooperation maintained by the willingness, the courage, the sense of responsibility, and the initiative of individuals—these being expressions of their devotion and submission to the will of God. Thus there is a balance of freedom between the institution, whether national or local, and the individuals who sustain its existence.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 29 December 1988 to the Bahá'ís of the United States of America) **[21]**

In general one can say that modern democracies have been established as the outcome of attempts to limit the power of absolute monarchy, of dictatorships, or of certain dominant classes. This may have come about gradually through the centuries, or tumultuously by a series of revolutions. Thus, even when democratic constitutions and structures have been established, there remains a suspicion of authority as such, and a tension between the degree of freedom accorded to individual citizens and the imposition of sufficient public discipline to protect the weak against the selfish pursuits of the strong among the citizenry. The operation of transparency, accountability, freedom of the press and critical dialogue is thus imbued with a spirit of partisanship that easily descends into the merciless invasion of personal privacy, the dissemination of calumny, the exaggeration of mistrust, and the misuse of the news media at the hands of vested interests. The reaction of those who attempt to protect themselves against such distortions of the system produces secretiveness, concealment of uncomfortable facts, and reciprocal misuse of the media—in all, a perpetuation of disharmony in the social fabric.

In contrast to these patterns bred by traditional antagonisms, the Bahá'í system is based upon the ideals of unity, harmony, justice, diversity and forbearance in the building of a divinely conceived administrative structure through a process of mutual learning and discovery. As already noted, the element of power-seeking is entirely absent. All members of a Bahá'í community, no matter what position they may temporarily occupy in the administrative structure, are expected to regard themselves as involved in a learning process, as they strive to understand and implement the laws and principles of the Faith. As part of this process, the Assemblies are encouraged to continually share their hopes and cares and the news of developments with the members of the community and to seek their views and support. There are, of course, matters such as the personal problems of a believer which he (or she) brings to his Assembly for advice, the amounts of the

contributions of individual believers to the Fund, and so forth, in relation to which the Assembly must observe strict confidentiality. As in any just system of government the proper balance has to be sought and found between extremes. In this connection, you will recall Shoghi Effendi's statement in *Bahá'í Administration*:

> 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.
>
> (From a letter dated 18 July 2000 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[22]**

"Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause," he [the Guardian] 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."...

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[23]**

Interdependence of the Elected and the Appointed

The Continental Boards of Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies share in the functions of propagation and protection, but the Counsellors specialize in these functions from a different level and in a different manner. From a continental vantage point, the Counsellors bring a perspective to their functions which, when offered to a National Assembly in the form of counsel, advice, recommendations, suggestions or commentary, enriches the latter's understanding, acquaints it with a broader experience than its own, and encourages it to maintain a world-embracing vision....

With the opening of the fourth epoch of the Formative Age, a procedure was activated by which the goals of national plans are formulated in joint consultations of National Spiritual Assemblies and Continental Counsellors. It initiated a new phase in the maturation of the Administrative Order. This development ensures two significant benefits in particular: It enables each institution to draw on the experiences and insights particular to the other, thereby making available to the planning process two distinct channels of information from two levels of Bahá'í administration; and it also assures to the Counsellors a necessary familiarity with the background, rationale, and content of national plans, which as a matter of principle they are expected to support. Both institutions obtain strength from such collaboration....

(The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[24]**

Further, in addition to the Spiritual Assemblies, the Bahá'í Administrative Order also contains the institutions of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and their Auxiliary Boards. Their endeavours, with the individuals, the community and the institutions, are intended to help maintain the true spirit of the Faith, to counsel the governing institutions and to assist them to attain the high ideals set before them by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. As the House of Justice wrote in a letter dated 24 April 1972: "The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past." The House of Justice went on to comment that, only as the Bahá'í community grows, and the believers are increasingly able to contemplate its administrative structure uninfluenced by concepts from past ages, will the vital interdependence of these two arms of the administration be properly understood and the value of their interaction be fully recognized.

(From a letter dated 18 July 2000 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[25]**

The Administrative Order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh accomplishes its divinely ordained purpose through a system of institutions, each with its defined sphere of action. The central governing body of the Order is the Universal House of Justice, whose terms of reference are the revealed Word of Bahá'u'lláh together with the interpretations and expositions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. Under its guidance, legislative, executive and judicial authority over the affairs of the Bahá'í community is exercised by Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. This authority is also exercised by Regional Councils, committees and other agencies established by these institutions, to the extent that it is so delegated.

Together with the authority vested in elected corporate bodies to make decisions binding on the community is the spiritual, moral and intellectual influence that the Administrative Order exerts on both the lives of believers and the work of the Faith's institutions. This influence acquires a special character through the services performed by those individuals who are appointed to the high rank of Counsellors and by their deputies. More specifically, the Continental Counsellors and the members of the Auxiliary Boards and their assistants are charged with functions relating to the protection and propagation of the Faith. In carrying out their duties, the Continental Counsellors receive their guidance from the International Teaching Centre, an institution whose mandate is global and which functions in close proximity to the Universal House of Justice.

Acting in their respective roles, the two institutions of the Counsellors and the Spiritual Assemblies share responsibility for the protection and propagation of the Faith. The harmonious interaction between them ensures the constant flow of guidance, love and encouragement to the believers and invigorates their individual and collective endeavours to advance the Cause.…

Freed from those administrative functions assigned to elected bodies, the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members are able to concentrate their energies on the task of promoting adherence to principle on the part of individual Bahá'ís, Bahá'í institutions and Bahá'í communities. Their understanding of the Teachings, together with the wisdom that comes from the experience gained through intimate involvement in the many aspects of Bahá'í activity, especially qualifies them to offer advice that assists the work of elected bodies. Further, the fact that they occupy a rank higher than that of the Spiritual Assemblies ensures that they are kept properly informed and that Spiritual Assemblies give due consideration to their advice and recommendations. The administrative processes of the Faith are not only concerned with judicial

matters, laws and regulations, and programmes that direct action, but also embrace those measures that elicit from the friends wholehearted response and channel their energies.

(*The Institution of the Counsellors*, a document prepared by the Universal House of Justice (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2001), pp. 2–3) **[26]**

The relationship of the Continental Boards of Counsellors to National Spiritual Assemblies is one of loving cooperation between two institutions of the Faith that are serving the same ends and are eager to see the same divine confirmations descend upon the efforts of the friends to promote and firmly establish the Cause. It is an evolving relationship that becomes richer as the two institutions face the challenge of building Bahá'í communities and witness with pride the onward march of the Faith.

As Continental Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies work together to ensure the expansion and consolidation of the community, the National Assemblies make all the necessary executive decisions and take responsibility for their implementation. The Counsellors bring to their functions a continental perspective which, when offered to the Assembly in the form of counsel, advice, recommendations, suggestions or commentary, enriches the latter's understanding, acquaints it with a broader experience than its own, and encourages it to maintain a world-embracing vision.

As appointees of the Universal House of Justice, the Counsellors assist the Head of the Faith to broaden the base, foster the strength and ensure the security of the National Spiritual Assemblies and the institutions and communities under their jurisdiction. Through the Auxiliary Boards, the Counsellors spread the benefits of their functions to the Local Spiritual Assemblies and the grassroots of the community.

The Counsellors, in the discharge of their responsibilities, support the initiatives adopted by a National Spiritual Assembly, initiatives that often arise from joint deliberations of the two institutions. The Auxiliary Board members explain to the friends the nature and purpose of these initiatives, motivate them to rise and respond to the call of the Assembly, and encourage them to persist in unified action. The Counsellors, of course, have a wide latitude in determining in what manner their institution will carry out these tasks.

A crucial feature of the work of the Counsellors that enables them to offer valuable advice to the National Spiritual Assemblies is their aloofness from administrative details, a freedom that allows them to concentrate on the vital issues of the Cause. Care must be exercised, however, that this aloofness does not give rise to extreme situations. Counsellors should not become inhibited from expressing their views to the National Spiritual Assemblies on administrative matters, and National Spiritual Assemblies should not feel restricted in availing themselves of the opportunity of consulting the Counsellors on such issues.

The Counsellors have not only the right but the obligation to deliberate with, advise, and offer suggestions to the National Spiritual Assemblies in the discharge of their specific functions. They alert National Assemblies to any problems or tendencies in the Bahá'í community which they feel require attention. Their concern in this respect extends to the very functioning of the National Assemblies. If the Counsellors notice serious departures from administrative or other principles in the work of a National Spiritual Assembly or its agencies, they are to consult with the Assembly about the matter and suggest corrective action. This they must do irrespective of any apprehension that such a step might give rise to tension between the two institutions.

(*The Institution of the Counsellors*, pp. 15–16) **[27]**

Your efforts to improve your understanding of the nature of collaboration with the Counsellors, the success of which is essential to the advancement of the Cause, are warmly appreciated by the House of Justice. As you know from your study of *The Institution of the*

Counsellors, "the relationship of the Continental Boards of Counsellors to National Spiritual Assemblies is one of loving cooperation between two institutions of the Faith that are serving the same ends and are eager to see the same divine confirmations descend upon the efforts of the friends to promote and firmly establish the Cause." Within a close and respectful relationship, the Counsellors and National Assemblies collaborate in carrying out a wide range of responsibilities with which they are entrusted and many of which they share.

As a way of better understanding the process of that collaboration, it may prove helpful to look at the broader perspective of decision making and consultation. You are, of course, familiar with the principle that in general a National Assembly makes a final decision when only its members are present. In practice, it is reasonable to exercise a degree of flexibility, especially in the specific case of your consultations with the Counsellors. For example, on those occasions when matters of mutual concern are discussed with the Counsellors—such as the training institute or other areas that are dependent for their success on the two institutions working together in full agreement—it is often the case that unity of thought is achieved during consultation, including decisions on specific actions that need to be pursued. In such cases, it would be appropriate for the National Assembly to simply accept the results of deliberations and record them in the minutes as its decision. As mentioned in *The Institution of the Counsellors*: "The attitude of the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies towards each other is not motivated by a legalistic application of the rules of their functional relationship"; and "Interactions between the two institutions flourish in an atmosphere of love according to the dictates of genuine respect".

As the Counsellors and National Assemblies approach their work, they would do well to avoid extremes. Too much emphasis on the merits of consensus can result in the imposition of the stricture that everything is to be decided together. On the other hand, a sterile focus on roles can lead to a rigid application of the inadequate generalization that Counsellors advise, National Assemblies decide, and Counsellors support. Moreover, if during a joint meeting, a National Assembly member withholds views that differ from what the Counsellor has said, only to make his case to the National Assembly once it is alone, he deprives all participants of the opportunity to achieve clarity and a common understanding. Flexibility is also needed here, for not all consultation is intended to reach a specific conclusion, such as that at a Convention where the aim is to build a unity of thought or generate a vision, a strategic direction, or a readiness or inclination for action. Nor does all consultation between the two institutions take place within the council chamber; scope needs to be provided for ongoing consultation, for example, between a Counsellor and the Secretary of the National Assembly, as plans agreed upon are implemented and responses to new developments are worked out. Addressing the question of flexibility in the administration of the Cause, the Guardian stated in a letter to a National Assembly, "This is the whole spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's system: rigid conformity to great essential laws, elasticity, and even a certain necessary element of diversity, in secondary matters". And the House of Justice has warned of the consequences of too fixed an adherence to the technical aspects of our administrative functioning: "But occupation with the mechanics of Bahá'í Administration, divorced from the animating spirit of the Cause, leads to a distortion, to an arid secularization foreign to the nature of the Administration".

As stated in *The Institution of the Counsellors*, the relationship of the Continental Board of Counsellors to the National Spiritual Assembly "is an evolving relationship that becomes richer as the two institutions face the challenge of building Bahá'í communities and witness with pride the onward march of the Faith." New dimensions of the "dynamic interdependence" between these two institutions will emerge over time as the work of the Cause advances and becomes more complex, giving rise to new approaches to decision making. The art and skill of Bahá'í consultation is also evolving; as the principles of consultation are practiced more fully, the quality of collaboration among the institutions will be enhanced, giving further impetus to the growth and development of the Faith and enriching the spiritual life of the community. The House of Justice has confidence in your capacity to resolve the questions you have raised, through your ongoing,

thorough study of *The Institution of the Counsellors* and your loving consultation with the Counsellors.

(From a letter dated 25 March 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[28]**

In the realm of Bahá'í administration, the capacity of National Spiritual Assemblies to manage the affairs of their communities in all their growing complexity has been considerably enhanced. They have benefited in particular from new heights of collaboration with the Counsellors, who have been instrumental in systematizing the gathering of insights from the grassroots across the world and ensuring they are widely disseminated.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2021 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[29]**

Facilitating an Evolving Framework for Action

Evolution of the Administrative Order and its Institutions

Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they [the community of the Most Great Name] 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, to which the life of the world-wide Bahá'í Community is wholly consecrated, that constitutes the one hope of a stricken society. For this process is actuated by the generating influence of God's changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.

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 anemic and lost their virtue, this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive, has been taking shape, is crystallizing into institutions, is mobilizing its forces, and is preparing for the spiritual conquest and the complete redemption of mankind. Though the society which incarnates its ideals be small, and its direct and tangible benefits as yet inconsiderable, yet the potentialities with which it has been endowed, and through which it is destined to regenerate the individual and rebuild a broken world, are incalculable.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 11 March 1936, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 195) **[30]**

[A] fundamental principle which enables us to understand the pattern towards which Bahá'u'lláh wishes human society to evolve is the principle of organic growth which requires that detailed developments, and the understanding of detailed developments, become available only with the passage of time and with the help of the guidance given by that Central Authority in the Cause to whom all must turn. In this regard one can use the simile of a tree. If a farmer plants a tree, he cannot state at that moment what its exact height will be, the number of its branches or the exact time of its blossoming. He can, however, give a general impression of its size and pattern of growth and can state with confidence which fruit it will bear. The same is true of the evolution of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

(From a letter dated 27 April 1995 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[31]**

As for the institutions, entry by troops will act upon them as much as they will act upon it. The evolution of local and national Bahá'í Assemblies at this time calls for a new state of mind on the part of their members as well as on the part of those who elect them, for the Bahá'í community is engaged in an immense historical process that is entering a critical stage.

Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world institutions to operate in an Order designed to canalize the forces of a new civilization. Progress towards that glorious realization requires a great and continuous expansion of the Bahá'í community, so that adequate scope is provided for the maturation of these institutions. This is a matter of immediate importance to Bahá'u'lláh's avowed supporters in all lands.

For such an expansion to be stimulated and accommodated, the Spiritual Assemblies must rise to a new stage in the exercise of their responsibilities as channels of divine guidance, planners of the teaching work, developers of human resources, builders of communities, and loving shepherds of the multitudes. They can realize these prospects through increasing the ability of their members to take counsel together in accordance with the principles of the Faith and to consult with the friends under their jurisdiction, through fostering the spirit of service, through spontaneously collaborating with the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries, and through cultivating their external relations. Particularly must the progress in the evolution of the institutions be manifest in the multiplication of localities in which the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly enhances the individual believers' capacity to serve the Cause and fosters unified action. In sum, the maturity of the Spiritual Assembly must be measured not only by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning, but also by the continuity of the growth of Bahá'í membership, the effectiveness of the interaction between the Assembly and the members of its community, the quality of the spiritual and social life of the community, and the overall sense of vitality of a community in the process of dynamic, ever-advancing development.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1996 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[32]**

The institutions of the Administrative Order of Bahá'u'lláh, rooted in the provisions of His Revelation, have emerged gradually and organically, as the Bahá'í community has grown through the power of the divine impulse imparted to humankind in this age. The characteristics and functions of each of these institutions have evolved, and are still evolving, as are the relationships between them. The writings of the beloved Guardian expound the fundamental elements of this mighty System and make it clear that the Administrative Order, although different in many ways from the World Order which it is the destiny of the Bahá'í Revelation to call into being, is both the "nucleus" and "pattern" of that World Order. Thus, the evolution of the institutions of the Administrative Order, while following many variants to meet changing conditions in different times and places, should strictly follow the essential principles of Bahá'í administration which have been laid down in the Sacred Text and in the interpretations provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 May 1997 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[33]**

In your deliberations on the nature of this next stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, you need to take into account the magnitude of the changes occurring in the fortunes of the Faith. At the World Centre, the raising of the great edifices now standing on the Arc represents a major step in the consolidation of a divinely appointed Administrative Order. The Four Year Plan witnessed a remarkable increase in the institutional capacity of Bahá'í communities in every continent. The evolution of National and Local Spiritual Assemblies has visibly accelerated, and Regional Councils, where they have been established, have brought a new energy and effectiveness to the work of the Cause. With the birth and efflorescence of more than 300 training institutes, the Faith now possesses a powerful instrument for developing the human resources needed to sustain large-scale expansion and consolidation. Further, the ability of the Bahá'í community to influence the course of human affairs, both through its dealings with governments and organizations of civil society and through its endeavours in social and economic development, has been greatly enhanced. The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh stands at the threshold of a new epoch, at a moment in history when, despite confusion and outbursts of fresh hostility, the world has made

real strides towards peace. One clearly sees an increasing receptivity to His all-pervasive and resplendent Spirit.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 9 January 2001 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[34]**

As you are well aware, the Administrative Order is being developed under the direction and supervision of the Universal House of Justice. As the interests of the Cause decree, the House of Justice provides elaboration of the functions assigned to Spiritual Assemblies, Regional Bahá'í Councils, Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members, and of the growing interaction between these various bodies. All of this occurs within the framework of the fundamental principles governing the distinction between the duties conferred on elected institutions and functions specified for institutions which operate primarily as individuals.

(From a letter dated 8 February 2004 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[35]**

Eighty years ago, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian described Bahá'í administration as "the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living". Today, at the beginning of the second century of the Formative Age, the shape of Bahá'í administration has developed considerably, and its continued development will be essential for the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[36]**

A Learning Mode

The culture of the Bahá'í community experienced a change. This change is noticeable in the expanded capability, the methodical pattern of functioning and the consequent depth of confidence of the three constituent participants in the Plan—the individual, the institutions and the local community. That is so because the friends concerned themselves more consistently with deepening their knowledge of the divine Teachings and learned much—and this more systematically than before—about how to apply them to promulgating the Cause, to managing their individual and collective activities, and to working with their neighbours. In a word, they entered into a learning mode from which purposeful action was pursued. The chief propellant of this change was the system of training institutes established throughout the world with great rapidity—an accomplishment which, in the field of expansion and consolidation, qualifies as the single greatest legacy of the Four Year Plan.

In the increased capacity of individuals to teach the Faith, as shown in the thrust of individual initiatives; in the improved ability of Spiritual Assemblies, Councils and committees to guide the endeavours of the friends; in the introduction of new patterns of thought and action which influenced the collective behaviour of the local community—in all such respects the system of training institutes demonstrated its indispensability as an engine of the process of entry by troops.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2000 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[37]**

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 programmes 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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[38]**

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….

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[39]**

Among the myriad tasks facing the National Assembly at this time are facilitating the flow of guidance and encouragement to the believers and the community; supporting the work of the Councils and the regional institutes ...; carrying out the external affairs work; putting in place provisions for the care of the properties of the Faith; making sure that sufficient quantities of suitable literature are at hand for teaching and deepening activities in clusters; assisting the friends in their efforts to gather reliable statistics using the Statistical Report Program; and instituting proper record keeping and responsible stewardship of the funds of the Faith. While some of these tasks will require your direct involvement, others are the responsibilities of the agencies that operate under your general guidance but have sufficient latitude of work to function with a spirit of learning. It is vital that your approach in all this be rooted in a desire to raise the capacity of your community and its institutions to shoulder the work of the Cause.

(From a letter dated 23 September 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[40]**

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 ... 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 endeavour, 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, re-examine 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.... 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 Bahá'u'lláh 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....

... 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 endeavour.

(From a letter dated 24 July 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[41]**

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[42]**

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2016 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[43]**

As you are aware, each of the various institutions and agencies of the Faith in your country holds a measure of responsibility for promoting the spiritual and material development of your community. Through your loving assistance and with the aid of the Counsellors, the capacity of these entities to act in an effective manner will certainly increase. This will no doubt require that they be afforded sufficient latitude to function in a spirit of learning and be provided with encouragement, support, and material resources as needed. Yours is the task to create an environment that allows the institutions and agencies to flourish and to guide them without becoming excessively directive in your oversight of their work. Overall, it beseems you to delight in the progress of the believers and the achievements of the institutions and agencies of the Faith operating at the regional, cluster, and local level, alert to their successes as well as to instances where encouragement and counsel may be helpful. The development of the institutions and agencies in your country will naturally be the subject of ongoing reflection and consultation between your Assembly and the Counsellors.

(From a letter dated 9 February 2017 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[44]**

Building Institutional Capacity and Developing Human Resources

Regional Bahá'í Councils

The expansion of the Bahá'í community and the growing complexity of the issues which are facing National Spiritual Assemblies in certain countries have brought the Cause to a new stage in its development. They have caused us in recent years to examine various aspects of the balance between centralization and decentralization. In a few countries we have authorized the National Spiritual Assemblies to establish State Bahá'í Councils or Regional Teaching and Administrative Committees. From the experience gained in the operation of these bodies, and from detailed examination of the principles set forth by Shoghi Effendi, we have reached the conclusion that the time has arrived for us to formalize a new element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, comprising institutions of a special kind, to be designated as "Regional Bahá'í Councils".

Regional Bahá'í Councils will be brought into being only with our permission and only in countries where conditions make this step necessary. Nevertheless, we find it desirable to inform all National Spiritual Assemblies of the nature of this historic development, and to make clear its place in the evolution of national and local Bahá'í institutions….

Regional Bahá'í Councils partake of some, but not all, characteristics of Spiritual Assemblies, and thus provide a means of carrying forward the teaching work and administering related affairs of a rapidly growing Bahá'í community in a number of situations. Without such an institution, the development of a national committee structure required to cover the needs in some countries would run the danger of over-complexity through adding a further layer of committees under the regional committees, or the danger of excessive decentralization through conferring too much autonomy on committees which are characterized by the Guardian as "bodies that should be regarded in no other light than that of expert advisers and executive assistants."

The distinguishing effects of the establishment of Regional Bahá'í Councils are the following:

- It provides for a level of autonomous decision making on both teaching and administrative matters, as distinct from merely executive action, below the National Assembly and above the Local Assemblies.
- It involves the members of Local Spiritual Assemblies of the area in the choice of the members of the Council, thus reinforcing the bond between it and the local believers while, at the same time, bringing into public service capable believers who are known to the friends in their own region.
- It establishes direct consultative relationships between the Continental Counsellors and the Regional Bahá'í Councils.
- It offers the possibility of forming a Regional Bahá'í Council in an ethnically distinct region which covers parts of two or more countries. In such a situation the Council is designated to work directly under one of the National Assemblies involved, providing copies of its reports and minutes to the other National Assembly.
- The greater degree of decentralization involved in the devolution of authority upon Regional Bahá'í Councils requires a corresponding increase in the capacity of the National Spiritual Assembly itself to keep fully informed of what is proceeding in all parts of the territory over which it has ultimate jurisdiction.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 May 1997 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[45]**

Collateral with the demonstrated efficacy of training institutes is the pragmatic emergence of Regional Bahá'í Councils in selected countries where conditions have made the establishment of these institutions necessary and viable. Where there is close interaction between a Council and a training institute, the stage is set for a galvanic coherence of the processes effecting expansion and consolidation in a region, and for the practical matching of the training services of institutes to the developmental needs of local communities. Moreover, the operational guidelines whereby the Continental Counsellors and the Regional Councils have direct access to each other give rise to a further institutional relationship which, along with that connecting the Councils to the National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, effectuates a dynamic integration of functions at the regional level.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1999 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[46]**

Thus, at all levels, elements of the Bahá'í administration became involved in the planning process, and reached beyond this stage to that of implementation, at which the institutional capacity to

cope with entry by troops had to be created. Two major steps were taken in this regard: one was the establishment of training institutes; the other was the formal establishment and widespread introduction of Regional Bahá'í Councils as a feature of the administration between the local and national levels to strengthen the administrative capacity of certain communities where the growing complexity of the issues facing National Spiritual Assemblies required this development.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2000 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[47]**

The administration of teaching is preeminent among the categories of responsibility in which a National Spiritual Assembly exercises its authority to direct and coordinate the affairs of its community. The execution of this responsibility is of a different character, however, from that of, say, the administration of justice; for whereas the latter is properly concentrated in the activity of the Assembly, which must itself render judgments on cases submitted to it, the former is essentially concerned with efforts initiated and maintained at the base of the community and thus calls for a decentralized mode of management—a means of functioning that makes possible the mobilization of action among the generality of believers, whose individual initiatives must be accommodated in a coherent movement of teaching at the level of clusters. Where rapid or substantial growth is occurring, such management ensures that due attention is given not only to executing the plan for expansion and consolidation, but also to addressing the needs of varying patterns of growth from one area to another, to coping with emerging new realities, as well as to applying the lessons of experience in rapidly changing situations. This closeness of attention is not possible from the top, whatever mechanisms may be set in place at the National Center. Particularly at this stage in the evolution of the Divine Plan, when the community must prepare administratively to accommodate entry by troops, your responsibility towards the expansion of the Faith demands a high degree of devolution of administrative authority to appropriate subsidiary institutions, so that the requisites for maintaining progressive activity in the clusters can be adequately met.

For example, in this context, all programmatic and administrative matters pertaining to growth of the Faith in its area are the proper concern of every Regional Bahá'í Council and are to be dealt with by it in accordance with the requirements for the execution of the Five Year Plan in your community. The Regional Councils are the executive instruments of the National Spiritual Assembly authorized to act on its behalf in devising and promoting programs dedicated to fulfilling the aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. The Councils direct and coordinate the work of cluster agencies, as well as ensure the collaborative involvement of Local Spiritual Assemblies in cluster and core activities.

(From a letter dated 5 January 2006 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[48]**

A new chapter in the evolution of the Administrative Order ... 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 grassroots, 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.

(From a letter dated 9 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[49]**

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[50]**

Where a Regional Council has developed an enhanced capacity for administration, including an ability to provide appropriate kinds of support to many clusters at once, this has been conducive to the accelerated progress of the whole region.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[51]**

The Training Institute

We are greatly heartened by the news reaching us of the enthusiastic response of the friends to the Four Year Plan. Particularly encouraging are the efforts of National Spiritual Assemblies everywhere to establish training institutes and to systematically address the development of human resources. The number of national and regional institutes is rapidly increasing, and indications are that there may be more than one hundred operating in the world by the close of the first year of the Plan. We cherish the hope that from each of these centres of learning will issue forth ever-growing contingents of believers capable of carrying out a wide array of services to the Cause, creating thus in every country the capacity to sustain the process of entry by troops.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 6 August 1996 to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[52]**

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 Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2007 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[53]**

Surely you have observed that a longing to arise and actively participate in the work of community building and contribute to the transformation of society is especially discernible among the youth—who, at every stage in the growth of the Cause of God, have made vital contributions to its progress. The institute is charged with a sacred duty to release the capacity inherent in the youth and channel their time and energy, skills and talents, towards the provision of spiritual education to a rising generation. Yet, this capacity will only develop in an environment in which young people feel the trust and confidence of the institutions, as well as the love and encouragement of the community and their families. As affirmed by the Guardian, the future rests upon the youth. As such, they must gain valuable experience in all affairs of the Faith so that they are prepared and have the strength to shoulder weighty responsibilities. They must have the opportunity to make sacrifices for the progress of the Faith, as the generations before them have done. The House of Justice trusts that you will support them unequivocally, having faith in their abilities and seeking at all times to empower them to achieve greater heights of service.

(From a letter dated 9 February 2017 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[54]**

Cherished friends, this is truly a moment to give thanks to the Best-Beloved. There are a great many reasons to be encouraged. Yet we are only too aware of the scale of the task that remains. Fundamentally, as we have previously indicated, there must emerge in many hundreds of clusters a growing band of believers who can maintain, with those around them, a sustained focus on nurturing growth and building capacity, and who are distinguished by their ability and their discipline to reflect on action and learn from experience. Raising up and accompanying an expanding nucleus of individuals in each place—not just at the level of the cluster but within neighbourhoods and villages—is at once a formidable challenge and a critical need. But where this is occurring, the results speak for themselves.

We are reassured to see that the institutions of the Faith are keeping this supreme need at the forefront of their thinking, devising effective mechanisms to enable the insights arising from progress to be widely applied. At the same time, greater experience is endowing national, regional, and local bodies alike with broader vision. They are becoming involved in all aspects of the community's development and are concerned with the well-being of people beyond its formal membership. Conscious of the profound implications the institute process holds for the advancement of peoples, they are paying particular attention to how the training institute can be strengthened. They remain mindful of the need to maintain the community's focus on the requirements of the Plan and call the ever-widening circle of friends to higher and higher levels of unity. They faithfully uphold their responsibility to refine their administrative and financial systems so that the work of expansion and consolidation can be properly supported. In all this, they are ultimately occupied with cultivating in the community those conditions that conduce to the release of powerful spiritual forces.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2018 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[55]**

Your Assembly comes into existence at the opening of a new series of Plans, at a time when the world is in desperate need of the divine remedy Bahá'u'lláh has prescribed. Therefore, one of the great tasks before you will be to foster growth by raising up the human resources necessary to answer this need in your country, especially from amongst the youth. At every stage in the growth of the Cause of God, youth have made vital contributions to its progress. For them to continue to flourish, it is essential to create an environment in which they feel the trust of the institutions and the love of their community and thus arise to meet the challenges ahead of them with confidence, joy, and courage. You should have faith in their abilities and seek at all times to empower them to achieve greater heights of service.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated Riḍván 2021 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[56]**

Local Spiritual Assemblies

He is constantly yearning for happy news concerning the spread of the Message and this, he is firmly convinced, depends mainly on the united and combined efforts of the friends and the Assemblies. Without unity, co-operation and selfless service the friends will surely be unable to attain their goal. How can we possibly increase in number and in strength if we do not present a united front to those forces, both from without and within, which threaten to undermine the very edifice of the Cause? Unity is, therefore, the main key to success. And the best way to ensure and consolidate the organic unity of the Faith is to strengthen the authority of the Local Assemblies and to bring them within the full orbit of the National Assembly's jurisdiction. The National Assembly is the head, and the Local Assemblies are the various organs of the body of the Cause. To ensure full co-operation between these various parts is to safeguard the best interests of the Faith by enabling it to counteract those forces which threaten to create a breach within the ranks of the faithful.

(From a letter dated 20 September 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) **[57]**

The National Spiritual Assemblies and their agencies on the one hand, and the Counsellors and their auxiliaries on the other, clearly have a duty to foster the establishment and development of Bahá'í communities, including their divinely ordained local institutions. This duty can be discharged mainly through sustained educational programmes which create in the believers the awareness of the importance of the Teachings in every area of their individual and social lives and which engender in them the desire and determination to elect and support their Local Spiritual Assemblies. These programmes should take full advantage of the provision that has been made for the temporary formation of administrative committees of three or more members in localities where Local Assemblies are not elected, or where the members of a Local Assembly fail to meet.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 26 December 1995 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[58]**

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….

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[59]**

It is particularly pleasing to note your efforts to work closely with Local Spiritual Assemblies in order to learn more about the effective facilitation of the flow of guidance and information to all the believers. In this connection, you may wish to focus such efforts initially on a few selected Local Assemblies in localities that have a large Bahá'í population or where growth is accelerating. After some experience has been gained, these efforts could be extended to other Assemblies. In addition, beyond the dissemination of guidance and information to the communities, it is vital that you also help the institutions and agencies in your country consider effective ways of assisting the believers, as well as their friends from the wider society who are labouring together with them, to grow in their capacity to study the guidance and apply it in the context of the experience being generated at the grassroots.

(From a letter dated 17 June 2020 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[60]**

The Institution of the Fund

And as the progress and extension of spiritual activities is dependent and conditioned upon material means, it is of absolute necessity that immediately after the establishment of local as well as national Spiritual Assemblies, a Bahá'í Fund be established, to be placed under the exclusive control of the Spiritual Assembly. All donations and contributions should be offered to the Treasurer of the Assembly, for the express purpose of promoting the interests of the Cause, throughout that locality or country. It is the sacred obligation of every conscientious and faithful servant of Bahá'u'lláh who desires to see His Cause advance to contribute freely and generously for the increase of that Fund. The members of the Spiritual Assembly will at their own discretion expend it to promote the Teaching Campaign, to help the needy, to establish educational Bahá'í institutions, to extend in every way possible their sphere of service. I cherish the hope that all the friends, realizing the necessity of this measure, will bestir themselves and contribute, however modestly at first, towards the speedy establishment and the increase of that Fund.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 12 March 1923, in *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 41–42) **[61]**

Of course, the participation of the friends in the courses of the training institute enhances their capacity to converse with their fellow believers about the spiritual significance of contributing to the Fund and to cultivate an environment in which it is natural to offer voluntary service to the Cause. Beyond this, raising awareness among the friends of the need for a continuous flow of material means to support the work of the Faith will be essential as the community continues to expand.

(From a letter dated 28 October 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[62]**

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 29 December 2015 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[63]**

The ongoing attention you are giving to educating the believers regarding the spiritual significance of contributing to the Funds of the Faith is warmly noted. As you no doubt realize, giving regularly and sacrificially to the Fund is intimately connected to an individual's consciousness of and dedication to promoting the Plans of the Faith. Thus as efforts are further systematized, in each of the clusters in your country where the growth process is under way, it is expected that contributing to the Fund will increasingly come to be viewed as integral to that process. In this light, beyond educating the friends concerning their sacred responsibility, your Assembly may wish to emphasize the strengthening of a culture in which the believers use whatever means are available to them in order to support the activities unfolding in their own communities. Such participation, by raising awareness of the needs and providing a range of possibilities to contribute to meeting them, will ultimately enable growing numbers of believers to increase their commitment to giving to the Funds of the Faith.

(From a letter dated 18 October 2017 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[64]**

With regard to the exercise of economy, much can be learned from the evolving practices in a few of the stronger regions in your country. The House of Justice has been heartened to see from the reports received at the Bahá'í World Centre that within your national community there is already widespread consciousness of the need for the judicious use of the funds and that a culture marked by resilience, resourcefulness, and a sense of collective responsibility has taken root, especially in advanced clusters, whereby the friends draw as much as possible upon whatever material resources exist in the community when carrying out their activities. For example, there appears to be an increasing number of localities where resources, such as food and housing, needed for organizing institute campaigns, local conferences, youth gatherings, or reflection meetings are offered by the community. There have also been examples of friends contributing in

various ways to the construction of facilities for the cluster. Further still, this culture is most evident in a few communities with strong Local Spiritual Assemblies, whereby teams have been established to facilitate various logistical aspects related to the activities of the training institute, a promising approach that can be applied in other localities. In order to cultivate such a culture more widely, these and other experiences will need to be documented and shared across the clusters in your country.

The House of Justice noted with pleasure your intention to set in motion several lines of action with the aim of raising the consciousness of the believers in … regarding their sacred obligation of contributing to the Funds of the Faith. In addition to the various actions you are contemplating in order to reach out to the generality of the believers …, you are asked to give special attention to youth and young adults. After all, a community is never static; those friends at the forefront of supporting the funds today have set a pace that must be followed by successive generations who will be prepared to shoulder this responsibility. As young people arise to play their part in fostering the spiritual and social advancement of their communities, joyful giving should naturally be an integral aspect of their spiritual education and lived experience.

In addition, throughout your country, there are multitudes engaged in the community-building process who are increasingly taking charge of their own spiritual and material development, inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and bolstered by the methods and instruments of the global Plans. While those who are yet to enrol in the Faith do not have the bounty of contributing to the Funds of the Faith, it would be natural that, as active protagonists, they would wish to assume ever-greater responsibility for meeting the material requirements of activities that they have come to regard as their own. There will thus be a need to foster in neighbourhoods and villages an atmosphere that welcomes and accommodates such a desire. The institutions and agencies of the Faith have much to learn about the participation of populations in meeting the material requirements of the processes unfolding at the grassroots.

(From a letter dated 30 May 2023 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[65]**

Releasing the Society-Building Power of the Cause

Propagation of Divine Teachings

In the Spiritual Assembly, the discussions must be confined to beneficial matters, that is, the exaltation of the Word of God, the propagation of the divine Teachings, the education of souls, the training of children, the protection and fostering of orphans, assistance to the poor and needy, relief for the weak and aged, and the promotion of benevolent pursuits and charitable deeds. But the greatest of all is the diffusion of the sweet savours of God, for this is the foundation.

('Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian) **[66]**

As the administrative work of the Cause steadily expands, as its various branches grow in importance and number, it is absolutely necessary that we bear in mind this fundamental fact that all these administrative activities, however harmoniously and efficiently conducted, are but means to an end, and should be regarded as direct instruments for the propagation of the Bahá'í Faith. Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause, we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created. Let us be on our guard lest the growing demand for specialization in the administrative functions of the Cause detain us from joining the ranks of those who in the forefront of battle are gloriously engaged in summoning the multitude to this new Day of God. This indeed should be our primary concern; this is our sacred obligation, our vital and urgent need. Let this cardinal principle be ever borne in mind, for it is the mainspring of all future activities, the remover of every embarrassing obstacle, the fulfilment of our Master's dearest wish.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 10 January 1926, in *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 103) **[67]**

The dissemination of Bahá'í literature should, likewise, be simultaneously carried out with increasing vigour. Whatever measures are required to ensure a more systematic and extensive propagation of the teachings of the Faith among the masses must be promptly and unhesitatingly adopted.

(From a postscript by Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 24 October 1947 written on his behalf to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[68]**

When each National Spiritual Assembly carefully compares the demands of the waiting public and the needs of the believers for Bahá'í literature with the current supply, it will realize how urgent is the need for it to multiply its efforts to ensure that a comprehensive range of our literature is made constantly available. The basic literature of the Faith must be translated into languages that are most suitable and in demand for the spread and development of the Faith in accordance with the goals of the Plan. In each national area the agencies for obtaining and disseminating Bahá'í literature should be greatly strengthened so that they will efficiently ensure an uninterrupted supply of the literature which is available from the various Publishing Trusts and organize its distribution throughout the area, through Local Assemblies and groups, by sale at conferences and summer schools, and directly to individuals. At the same time these agencies should ensure that the monies received from the sale of literature are kept separate from other funds of the Faith and are used for the replenishment of stocks of books and the widening of the range of literature available. National Assemblies must also give consideration to the need to cover the cost of certain literature out of the National Fund, so that it can be supplied free or sold at a price within the reach of those who urgently require it.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 25 May 1975 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[69]**

The idea that principle is maintained while practical strategies evolve according to the needs of the Faith also holds true for the administrative arrangements that support teaching. National Assemblies have always had the obligation to create efficient teaching structures, often with agencies at various levels, such as national, provincial or area teaching committees; the Regional Bahá'í Councils and Cluster Growth Committees constitute such structures to guide the progress of clusters. Local Assemblies always worked in the context of a national or regional teaching plan, and they now work, in advanced areas, in the context of an intensive programme of growth that operates at the level of a cluster. Ultimately, of course, it is the individual who must teach the Faith and carry out the other activities for expansion and consolidation. As the House of Justice wrote at the beginning of the effort to systematically advance the process of entry by troops, "thousands upon thousands of believers will need to be aided to express the vitality of their faith through constancy in teaching the Cause". The role of the Spiritual Assembly in teaching is primarily that of fostering and supporting such initiative.

(From a letter dated 29 August 2006 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[70]**

Contributing to Social Transformation

Social Action

Among the primary obligations of the Spiritual Assemblies is to provide, and carry through, effective measures for the advancement of the cause of women. It would be good if each Spiritual Assembly could form a special committee whose members night and day would devote their time and attention exclusively to urging and encouraging, ennobling and dignifying the honoured handmaids of the Merciful; to promoting education for girls; to perfecting and extending the

women's assemblies and gatherings; and to ensuring the cooperation of the women with the men in rendering services to the Cause and in strengthening the foundation of the Spiritual Assemblies.... Now is the time for providing the means and the day for the advancement of women in both inner and outer perfections. Whatsoever has been set down by the Pen of the Most High and revealed from the Pen of the Covenant, rest assured that the changes and chances of the times, the affairs of the world, and the measures and enterprises of the men of the earth will, in an indirect manner, gradually so conspire to furnish hidden, invisible means for the fulfilment of these explicit divine utterances that we shall all be bewildered, amazed, and admonished. Now is the time for confidence; today, the day for exertion and self-sacrifice. We must, with praiseworthy actions, observe the divine commandments and put our whole trust in the True One so that whatsoever He has purposed may come to pass without delay.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 19 December 1923 to the Bahá'ís of the East) **[71]**

The Assembly should, after earnest consultation and thorough examination and assessment of the requirements of the Cause and the needs of the people, make certain provisions according to its means and capacity, so that, in the course of time, necessary aid may be extended to the poor, the weak, and the needy from all backgrounds, and the common weal and the best interests of the Faith may likewise be rapidly promoted.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated July 1926 written to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[72]**

The most immediate access to the dynamic influence of the sacred Word is through reading. The ability to read is therefore a fundamental right and privilege of every human being. Bahá'u'lláh promotes this right in His command to parents to ensure the instruction of their sons and daughters in the "art of reading and writing." For this essential reason, in our last Riḍván message we called attention to the need for systematic attention to be given to eventually eliminating illiteracy from the Bahá'í community. This matter must assume its proper importance as a continuing objective of that community.

Let each National and Local Spiritual Assembly, according to necessity and circumstance, address itself to this objective, conscious that even where total achievement is not immediately possible, opportunities must be sought to make steady progress. Let each be confident that the shining example set by Iran, the mother community of the Bahá'í world, under the inspiration of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and the urging of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, upholds a standard all can follow. In the earliest years of this century, when no systematic, overall plan of education existed in Iran, the Bahá'ís seized their chance and organized a widespread programme of education. Its teachers were distinguished for their ability to foster child, youth and adult education, which led to significant self-improvement among the Iranian Bahá'ís. The emergence of a literate Bahá'í community was an outstanding result.

Some local or national Bahá'í communities may wish to follow the example of those who have already instituted their own literacy projects and are achieving notable success; others may wish to participate in literacy programmes organized by governmental or non-governmental organizations. Each community will have to determine whether to engage in one or the other, or to do both. Progress will depend not only on the initiatives of Bahá'í institutions in relation to children, but also on the active interest of adult believers who want to learn to read. Such friends should definitely be encouraged and assisted to achieve, with dignity, their heart's desire. Certainly, the willing participation of the friends in an undertaking of such importance to the upliftment of individuals and the consolidation of the Bahá'í community as a whole will attract divine favours and confirmations.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 10 July 1989 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[73]**

The promotion of learning of every kind among the Faith's members is an activity fundamental to the achievement of the community's wide-ranging goals. Consequently, the encouragement of individual believers to acquire knowledge, the operation of Bahá'í schools, universities, and training institutes, the organization of study groups, and the work of task forces dedicated to relating the principles of the Revelation to the challenges facing humankind all represent activities with which both the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, on the one hand, and National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, on the other, must concern themselves. In shouldering these demanding responsibilities, Bahá'í institutions everywhere find their efforts greatly enhanced by the assistance of believers whose intellectual pursuits, qualities of character, and devotion to the Cause particularly fit them to contribute their services.

(From a letter dated 14 March 1996 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) **[74]**

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 programmes aimed at the spiritual empowerment of junior youth. When accompanied for three years through a programme 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 programmes implemented by their training institutes a fourth core activity in its own right and to promote its wide-scale multiplication.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[75]**

When society is in such difficulty and distress, the responsibility of the Bahá'ís to make a constructive contribution to human affairs becomes more pronounced. This is a moment when distinct but interrelated lines of action converge upon a single point, when the call to service rings aloud. The individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith—inseparable protagonists in the advancement of civilization—are in a position to demonstrate the distinctive features of the Bahá'í way of life, characterized by increased maturity in the discharge of their responsibilities and in their relationships with each other. They are summoned to a fuller expression of the Faith's society-building powers. Agencies and projects dedicated to social action may have to adapt their approaches in order to meet expanded needs; efforts to do this are sure to infuse ongoing programmes with deeper meaning and purpose. Further, Bahá'í contributions to discourses newly prevalent in society are generating heightened interest, and there is a responsibility to be discharged here too. At a time when the urgency of attaining higher levels of unity, founded on the incontestable truth of humanity's oneness, is becoming apparent to larger and larger numbers, society stands in need of clear voices that can articulate the spiritual principles that underlie such an aspiration.

You are of course ever conscious that your responsibilities reach beyond those of administering the affairs of the community and channelling its energies towards the fulfilment of noble goals: you seek to raise awareness of those spiritual forces that are available to every confirmed believer and which must be marshalled at the hour of need. It is these forces which endow the community with resilience, ensure its integrity, and keep it focused on its divine mission to serve humanity and elevate its vision of the future.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 9 May 2020 to all National Spiritual Assemblies) **[76]**

The initial stirrings of grassroots social action begin to be seen in a cluster as the availability of human resources increases and capacity for a wider range of tasks develops. Villages have proven to be notably fertile ground from which social action initiatives have emerged and been sustained, but in urban settings too, friends living there have succeeded in carrying out activities and projects suited to the social environment, at times by working with local schools, agencies of civil society, or even government bodies. Social action is being undertaken in a number of important fields, including the environment, agriculture, health, the arts, and particularly education. Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, and especially as the study of specific institute courses stimulates greater activity in this area, we expect to see a proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a people. Some of these community-based initiatives will require basic administrative structures to sustain their work. Where conditions are propitious, Local Spiritual Assemblies will need to be encouraged to learn how best to cultivate new, fledgling initiatives and to foster efforts that show promise. In some cases, the needs associated with a particular field of endeavour will warrant the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, and we anticipate the appearance of more such organizations during the coming Plan. For their part, National Spiritual Assemblies will have to find ways in which they can stay well informed about what is being learned at the grassroots of their communities and analyse the experience being gained; in some places this will call for the creation of an entity dedicated to following social action. Looking across the Bahá'í world, we are delighted to see how much momentum has already been generated in this area of endeavour through the encouragement and support of the Bahá'í International Development Organization.…

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations. Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[77]**

In many parts of the world, a natural outcome of the participation of individuals and families in the institute process has been an increased consciousness of the importance of education in all its forms. Friends serving as children's class teachers take a keen interest in the broad educational development of those they teach, while friends serving as tutors and animators are naturally concerned with the extent to which those approaching or entering adulthood—girls and boys alike—can access and benefit from education of many kinds, not limited to the courses offered by the institute itself. For instance, they can encourage young people to look towards apprenticeships or university studies. We have been struck by how, in many communities, engagement in the institute process by large numbers has gradually reshaped this aspect of culture within a population. The institutions of the Faith will need to take responsibility for ensuring that, as

consciousness is raised in this way, the noble aspirations that arise in young people as a result—aspirations to acquire the education and training that will allow them to offer a lifetime of meaningful service to their society—can be fulfilled. The long-term development of a community and, ultimately, of a nation, from generation to generation, depends to a large degree on the effort made to invest in those who will assume responsibility for collective social progress.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[78]**

Involvement in the Discourses of Society

It is I feel for the national representatives of the believers in every land to utilize and combine both methods, the outspoken as well as the gradual, in such a manner as to secure the greatest benefit and the fullest advantage for this steadily-growing Cause. Every staunch and high-minded believer is thoroughly convinced of the unfailing efficacy of every humanitarian undertaking which boldly and unreservedly proclaims the source of its motive power to be the consciousness of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Yet, if we but call to mind the practice generally adopted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we cannot fail to perceive the wisdom, nay the necessity, of gradually and cautiously disclosing to the eyes of an unbelieving world the implications of a Truth which, by its own challenging nature, it is so difficult for it to comprehend and embrace….

As the Movement extends the bounds of its influence and its opportunities for fuller recognition multiply, the twofold character of the obligations imposed on its national elected representatives should, I feel, be increasingly emphasized. Whilst chiefly engaged in the pursuit of their major task, consisting chiefly in the formation and the consolidation of Bahá'í administrative institutions, they should endeavour to participate, within recognized limits, in the work of institutions which, though unaware of the claim of the Bahá'í Cause, are prompted by a sincere desire to promote the spirit that animates the Faith. In the pursuit of their major task their function is to preserve the identity of the Cause and the purity of the mission of Bahá'u'lláh. In their minor undertaking their purpose should be to imbue with the spirit of power and strength such movements as in their restricted scope are endeavouring to achieve what is near and dear to the heart of every true Bahá'í. It would even appear at times to be advisable and helpful as a supplement to their work for the Bahá'ís to initiate any undertaking not specifically designated as Bahá'í, provided that they have ascertained that such an undertaking would constitute the best way of approach to those whose minds and hearts are as yet unprepared for a full acceptance of the claim of Bahá'u'lláh. These twofold obligations devolving upon organized Bahá'í communities, far from neutralizing the effects of one another or of appearing antagonistic in their aims, should be regarded as complementary and fulfilling, each in its way, a vital and necessary function.

It is for the national representatives of the Bahá'í Cause to observe the conditions under which they labour, to estimate the forces that are at work in their own surroundings, to weigh carefully and prayerfully the merits of either procedure, and to form a correct judgement as to the degree of emphasis that should be placed upon these twofold methods. Then and only then will they be enabled to protect and stimulate on one hand the independent growth of the Bahá'í Faith, and on the other vindicate the claim of its universal Principles to the doubtful and unbelieving.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 20 February 1927, in *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 125–127) **[79]**

Learning about the participation of Bahá'ís in the discourses of society will advance as more and more believers throughout the world contribute to this area of activity over the coming years. This will occur at a number of levels. A growing number of individual believers will bring insights based on the writings to conversations in a variety of social spaces in which they find themselves —some will be related to life in their localities while others will be connected to their professions. Bahá'í-inspired agencies will naturally contribute to discourses associated with aspects of social

and economic development relevant to their work. Further, as programs of growth advance and the friends are drawn into the life of society around them, their efforts to overcome challenges facing their communities through the application of spiritual principles will invariably entail participation in discourses at the grassroots. That Bahá'í involvement in the discourses of society will grow organically at all levels, in line with the increasing capacity of the believers, is evident. Equally clear is the centrality of the role of the training institute to this process.

While a National Spiritual Assembly need not make specific plans for the above-mentioned areas, its involvement is required to guide participation in discourses at the national level—a task that can be assigned to its Office of External Affairs. The first step to be taken by such an Office, however, would not be to select topics on which to focus its efforts. Rather, it would seek to gradually familiarize itself with a variety of social spaces at the national level and learn about the associated discourses. As it does so, it will naturally avoid abstruse and divisive discussions and become increasingly adept at identifying spaces in which Bahá'ís can contribute ideas based on the teachings of the Faith. A brief word of caution is required: the purpose of participation in the discourses of society is not to persuade others to accept a Bahá'í position or to engage in direct teaching. Nor should it be understood as a public relations activity or academic exercise. Rather, those involved adopt a posture of learning and engage in genuine conversations in which they can offer insights drawn from the writings and from their experience in applying them as a contribution to the advancement of a given discourse.

(From a letter dated 6 February 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[80]**

Our spirits have been lifted by seeing how capably National Spiritual Assemblies, the unflagging generals of the Army of Light, have guided their communities and shaped their response to the crisis.[1] They have been strongly supported by the Counsellors and their auxiliaries who, as always, have heroically raised aloft the standard of loving service. While staying well informed about the often rapidly changing conditions in their countries, Assemblies have made the necessary arrangements for administering the affairs of the Cause, and in particular for conducting elections, where these remain feasible. Through regular communications, institutions and agencies have offered wise counsel, comforting reassurance, and constant encouragement. In many instances, they have also started to identify constructive themes that are emerging from the discourses opening up in their societies. The expectation we expressed in our Naw-Rúz message that this test of humanity's endurance would grant it greater insight is already being realized. Leaders, prominent thinkers, and commentators have begun to explore fundamental concepts and bold aspirations that, in recent times, have been largely absent from public discourse. At present these are but early glimmerings, yet they hold out the possibility that a moment of collective consciousness may be in view.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2020 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[81]**

As you are aware, the promotion of the Bahá'í community's intellectual life and its effort to focus the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation on the evolution of thought and the exploration of social reality is becoming ever more important. This is particularly the case as the Bahá'í community continues to be drawn further into the life of society and seeks alongside others to address the countless complex problems facing humanity, all against a backdrop of accelerating forces of disintegration. There are, of course, numerous contributors to this important work, including the institutions and agencies of the Faith, certain organizations, as well as many individual believers.

(From a letter dated 29 November 2022 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[82]**

Spiritual Health and Vitality of the Bahá'í Community

The National Assembly is the guardian of the welfare of the Faith, a most sacred and heavy responsibility and one which is inescapable. They must be ever vigilant, ever on the look-out, ever ready to take action, and, on all matters of fundamental principle, refuse to compromise for an instant. Only in this way can the body of the Faith be free of disease.

(From a letter dated 14 August 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[83]**

The aim of any Spiritual Assembly should be to develop a warm and loving relationship with the believers in its community, so that it can most effectively nurture and encourage them in the acquisition of a deeper understanding of the teachings, and can assist them to follow the Bahá'í principles in their personal conduct. The Assembly should aspire to being regarded by the members of the community as a loving parent, wise in its understanding of the varying degrees of maturity of those entrusted to its care, compassionate in dealing with the problems which arise as a result of any shortcomings, ever prepared to guide them to the correct path, and very patient as they strive to effect the necessary changes in their behaviour. Such an approach is far removed from the harshly judgmental and punitive approach which so often characterizes the administration of law in the wider society. The Bahá'í application of justice, firmly rooted in spiritual principle and animated by the desire to foster the spiritual development of the members of the community, will increasingly be seen as a distinctive and highly attractive feature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

(From a letter dated 9 December 1991 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[84]**

The appearance of a united, firmly based and self-sustaining community must be a major goal of a Spiritual Assembly. Composed of a membership reflecting a diversity of personalities, talents, abilities and interests, such a community requires a level of internal interaction between the Assembly and the body of the believers based on a commonly recognized commitment to service, and in which a sense of partnership based on appreciation of each other's distinctive sphere of action is fully recognized and unfailingly upheld, and no semblance of a dichotomy between the two appears. In such a community leadership is that expression of service by which the Spiritual Assembly invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.

The maintenance of a climate of love and unity depends largely upon the feeling among the individuals composing the community that the Assembly is a part of themselves, that their cooperative interactions with that divinely ordained body allow them a fair latitude for initiative and that the quality of their relationships with both the institution and their fellow believers encourages a spirit of enterprise invigorated by an awareness of the revolutionizing purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, by a consciousness of the high privilege of their being associated with efforts to realize that purpose, and by a consequent, ever-present sense of joy. In such a climate, the community is transformed from being the mere sum of its parts to assuming a wholly new personality as an entity in which its members blend without losing their individual uniqueness. The possibilities for manifesting such a transformation exist most immediately at the local level, but it is a major responsibility of the National Assembly to nurture the conditions in which they may flourish.

The authority to direct the affairs of the Faith locally, nationally and internationally, is divinely conferred on elected institutions. However, the power to accomplish the tasks of the community resides primarily in the mass of the believers. The authority of the institutions is an irrevocable necessity for the progress of humanity; its exercise is an art to be mastered. The power of action in the believers is unlocked at the level of individual initiative and surges at the level of

collective volition. In its potential, this mass power, this mix of individual potentialities, exists in a malleable form susceptible to the multiple reactions of individuals to the sundry influences at work in the world. To realize its highest purpose, this power needs to express itself through orderly avenues of activity. Even though individuals may strive to be guided in their actions by their personal understanding of the Divine Texts, and much can be accomplished thereby, such actions, untempered by the overall direction provided by authorized institutions, are incapable of attaining the thrust necessary for the unencumbered advancement of civilization.

Individual initiative is a pre-eminent aspect of this power; it is therefore a major responsibility of the institutions to safeguard and stimulate it. Similarly, it is important for individuals to recognize and accept that the institutions must act as a guiding and moderating influence on the march of civilization. In this sense, the divine requirement that individuals obey the decisions of their Assemblies can clearly be seen as being indispensable to the progress of society. Indeed, individuals must not be abandoned entirely to their own devices with respect to the welfare of society as a whole, neither should they be stifled by the assumption of a dictatorial posture by members of the institutions.

The successful exercise of authority in the Bahá'í community implies the recognition of separate but mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities between the institutions and the friends in general, a recognition that in turn welcomes the need for cooperation between these two interactive forces of society. As was stated in advice given by Shoghi Effendi: "The individuals and assemblies must learn to cooperate, and to cooperate intelligently, if they desire to adequately discharge their duties and obligations towards the Faith. And no such cooperation is possible without mutual confidence and trust."

(The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[85]**

They [the institutions of the Faith] do not pry into the personal lives of individuals. Nor are they vindictive and judgemental, 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.

(From a letter dated 19 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to three believers) **[86]**

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.... [T]he 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 endeavours, 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 fulfil their obligations as followers of Bahá'u'lláh, 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 Bahá'u'lláh 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, whole-hearted 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 Bahá'u'lláh'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 environment sought is, at the most fundamental level, one of love and support, in which the believers, all endeavouring 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 judgemental 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.

(From a letter dated 23 April 2013 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[87]**

As you are doubtless aware, the House of Justice has advised that responsibility for guiding certain areas of endeavour, among them initiatives of international scope and those related to the promotion of Bahá'í studies, is to be retained by Bahá'í institutions, which are tasked with directing the efforts of the community along effective avenues of action.

(From a letter dated 28 June 2016 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[88]**

The first requirement that an Assembly must exercise in upholding the laws of the Faith in its jurisdiction lies in having a sound approach to the general education of the believers about the laws, and such educational efforts can be set within the context of the greater purpose of the Revelation to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. In this way, the friends will obey the laws not through fear of punishment, but out of love for Bahá'u'lláh and an appreciation that these laws are conducive to their own spiritual and material development and to social well-being. While this approach—necessarily gradual and long-term—proceeds, Assemblies must use good judgement in applying the laws, bearing in mind their responsibility to lovingly and patiently educate new believers and younger generations within the Faith.

The application of these principles requires much thought, particularly in light of the ever-evolving situation in those neighbourhoods and villages where large numbers are participating in community-building activities, some of whom, often from among the youth, have embraced the Faith. In such places, as you have surely observed, the new Bahá'ís remain deeply embedded in the society around them and are engaged, along with many others, in activities that gradually change the dynamics within the whole population and help it move towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a New World Order. It is clear from your letter that the new believers in such places are becoming increasingly aware of the laws of the Faith and are trying to uphold them in their own lives. Nevertheless, it can be expected that the underlying social milieu of which they are inextricably a part, especially in the context of extended families, may at times compel them to compromise their efforts in this regard. Perhaps nowhere is this more challenging than in following the laws of personal status, such as marriage and burial.

What is needed in places that are becoming centers of intense activity, the House of Justice feels, is for a greater effort to be made to ensure that education about Bahá'í laws is directed not only to those who have formally enrolled in the Faith, but to all those who are in one way or another connected with the community-building process. The House of Justice has been very pleased to note that, in several clusters in ..., the friends are developing the capacity to reach out to a large number of households on a regular basis, to share Bahá'í principles, to invite greater participation in activities, and to gradually develop a pattern of community life based on the teachings of the Faith. Building on this experience, it should not be difficult to introduce a discourse within many households on the nature of Bahá'í family life and some of the laws of Bahá'u'lláh related to personal status. In doing so, you would naturally wish to clarify that the purpose of the laws given by the Manifestation of God is not to limit human possibilities or introduce new ritualistic practices to replace the old ones. Rather, it is to make it possible for human beings to experience true freedom and to fulfil their true potential, both individually and collectively. How often have the friends from the wider society, having attended a Bahá'í marriage ceremony, proclaimed their joy and wonder at its simplicity and dignity, being devoid of the ritualistic elements that many find cumbersome and unconducive to the upliftment of the soul. And how often, having become familiar with the provisions of Bahá'í marriage law, have they marvelled at the way it avoids reducing the marital bond to an economic transaction, but rather preserves its sacredness and integrity, and upholds the sanctity of the family unit. Indeed, every Bahá'í wedding is an opportunity to demonstrate to the larger public the special character of Bahá'í laws.

(From a letter dated 23 April 2018 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) **[89]**

The Three Protagonists

What has given me still greater pleasure is to learn that the members of this Central Body, which has assumed so grave a responsibility and is facing such delicate and difficult tasks, command individually and collectively not only the sympathy of their spiritual brethren and sisters but also can confidently rely on their active and whole-hearted support in the campaign of service to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh. It is indeed as it should be, for if genuine and sustained cooperation and mutual confidence cease to exist between individual friends and their Local and National Assemblies, the all-beneficent work of the Cause must cease and nothing else can enable it to function harmoniously and effectively in future.

(Shoghi Effendi, from a letter dated 23 December 1922, in *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 28) **[90]**

It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any national or local Assembly. For the bedrock of the Bahá'í administrative order is the principle of unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause. Differences which are not fundamental and contrary to the basic teachings of the Cause should be maintained, while the underlying unity of the administrative order should be at any cost preserved and insured. Unity, both of purpose and of means, is, indeed, indispensable to the safe and speedy working of every Assembly, whether local or national.

(From a letter dated 2 January 1934 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, in *Messages of Shoghi Effendi to the Indian Subcontinent, 1923–1957* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), pp. 108–109) **[91]**

"Regard the world as the human body," wrote Bahá'u'lláh to Queen Victoria. We can surely regard the Bahá'í world, the army of God, in the same way. In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it. This is true of the body of mankind in which God has "endowed each and all with talents and faculties", and is supremely true of the body of the Bahá'í world community, for this body is already an organism, united in its aspirations, unified in its methods, seeking assistance and confirmation from the same Source, and illumined with the conscious knowledge of its unity. Therefore, in this organic, divinely guided, blessed and illumined body the participation of every believer is of the utmost importance, and is a source of power and vitality as yet unknown to us....

The real secret of universal participation lies in the Master's oft expressed wish that the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated September 1964 to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[92]**

At Riḍván 1996, the Bahá'ís of the world will embark on a global enterprise aimed at one major accomplishment: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops. This is to be achieved through marked progress in the activity and development of the individual believer, of the institutions, and of the local community. That an advance in this process depends on the progress of all three of these intimately connected participants is abundantly clear. The next four years must witness a dramatic upsurge in effective teaching activities undertaken at the initiative

of the individual. Thousands upon thousands of believers will need to be aided to express the vitality of their faith through constancy in teaching the Cause and by supporting the plans of their institutions and the endeavours of their communities. They should be helped to realize that their efforts will be sustained by the degree to which their inner life and private character "mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh." An acceleration in the tempo of individual teaching must necessarily be complemented by a multiplication in the number of regional and local teaching projects. To this end the institutions should be assisted in increasing their ability to consult according to Bahá'í principles, to unify the friends in a common vision, and to use their talents in service to the Cause. Furthermore, those who enter the Faith must be integrated into vibrant local communities, characterized by tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will, environments in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 26 December 1995 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[93]**

Shoghi Effendi underscored the absolute necessity of individual initiative and action. He explained that without the support of the individual, "at once wholehearted, continuous and generous," every measure and plan of his National Spiritual Assembly is "foredoomed to failure," the purpose of the Master's Divine Plan is "impeded"; furthermore, the sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself "will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part." Hence, at the very crux of any progress to be made is the individual believer, who possesses the power of execution which only he can release through his own initiative and sustained action. Regarding the sense of inadequacy that sometimes hampers individual initiative, a letter written on his behalf conveys the Guardian's advice: "Chief among these, you mention the lack of courage and of initiative on the part of the believers, and a feeling of inferiority which prevents them from addressing the public. It is precisely these weaknesses that he wishes the friends to overcome, for these do not only paralyse their efforts but actually serve to quench the flame of faith in their hearts. Not until all the friends come to realize that every one of them is able, in his own measure, to deliver the Message, can they ever hope to reach the goal that has been set before them by a loving and wise Master.... Everyone is a potential teacher. He has only to use what God has given him and thus prove that he is faithful to his trust."...

The community, as distinguished from the individual and the institutions, assumes its own character and identity as it grows in size. This is a necessary development to which much attention is required both with respect to places where large-scale enrolment has occurred and in anticipation of more numerous instances of entry by troops. A community is of course more than the sum of its membership; it is a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress. Since Bahá'ís everywhere are at the very beginning of the process of community building, enormous effort must be devoted to the tasks at hand.

As we have said in an earlier message, the flourishing of the community, especially at the local level, demands a significant enhancement in patterns of behaviour: those patterns by which the collective expression of the virtues of the individual members and the functioning of the Spiritual Assembly are manifest in the unity and fellowship of the community and the dynamism of its activity and growth. This calls for the integration of the component elements—adults, youth and children—in spiritual, social, educational and administrative activities; and their engagement in local plans of teaching and development. It implies a collective will and sense of purpose to

perpetuate the Spiritual Assembly through annual elections. It involves the practice of collective worship of God. Hence, it is essential to the spiritual life of the community that the friends hold regular devotional meetings in local Bahá'í centres, where available, or elsewhere, including the homes of believers.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1996 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[94]**

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, channelling 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 endeavours 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.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[95]**

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....

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.

(The Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2008 message to the Bahá'ís of the world) **[96]**

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."

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[97]**

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 ʻAbdu'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 Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2012 message to the Bahá'ís of the World) **[98]**

The series of global Plans that began at Riḍván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Riḍván 2046. During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. ʻAbdu'l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, "the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity"; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.

(The Universal House of Justice, from a message dated 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors) **[99]**

Notes

1 The coronavirus pandemic. ↩

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