

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

17 April 1981

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

The message of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, dated March 1981, must have reached you by now, and, likewise, the specific message addressed to the Bahá'ís under your jurisdiction, outlining the goals of the second phase of the Seven Year Plan. The Universal House of Justice feels it is important that we share with you now, on its behalf, the following comments on certain aspects of the Plan. Each National Spiritual Assembly should be able to determine what portion of these comments is applicable to its work in the light of the goals it has been assigned.

The Local Spiritual Assembly

As you note from statements of guidelines and goals, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the activities of local communities. It is obvious that through the consolidation of the foundations of the Administrative Order on the local level, the national institutions of the Faith will receive support and strength in the conduct of their activities. In turn, the National Spiritual Assembly and its agencies should not only oversee the activities of the local communities, but it has the duty and privilege to coordinate the efforts and to stimulate and give direction to the spirit of enterprise and initiative of the individual friends. When a proper and balanced relationship is maintained between these two levels of Bahá'í activity, and a healthy interaction takes place between them, a foundation is laid for the community to become "spiritually welded into a unit at once dynamic and coherent."

The broad outlines of duties and functions of Local Spiritual Assemblies are set forth clearly in the instructions of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, and these instructions have already been sent to National Assemblies in the form of compilations. Similar statements have also been made by the Universal House of Justice, and these, too, have been shared with the friends. If any National Assembly does not have these compilations at hand, it should write to the World Center at once so that copies may be sent.

Consolidation

Consolidation is as vital a part of the teaching work as expansion. It is that aspect of teaching which assists the believers to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the Teachings, and fans the flame of their devotion to Bahá'u'lláh and His Cause, so that they will, of their own volition, continue the process of their spiritual development, promote the teaching work, and strengthen the functioning of their administrative institutions. Proper consolidation is essential to the preservation of the spiritual health of the community, to the protection of its interests, to the upholding of its good name, and ultimately to the continuation of the work of expansion itself.

If a National Spiritual Assembly finds that its National Teaching Committee cannot devote sufficient attention to the work of consolidation, it should not hesitate to appoint, in addition, special committees whose tasks would be the conduct of the various activities which are essential for consolidation. Activities falling within this category include the organization of circuits of traveling teachers skilled in consolidation work; the holding of summer and winter schools, weekend institutes and conferences; the initiation and operation of tutorial schools; the dissemination of Bahá'í literature and the encouragement of its study by the friends; and the organization of special courses and institutes for Local Spiritual Assembly members.

In the courses for Local Assembly members special attention should be paid to the significance of the Assembly and the importance of attending its meetings; the functions and duties of the Assembly's officers, especially those of the secretary, upon the proper discharge of whose responsibilities the efficient functioning of the Assembly largely depends; the importance of making the Word of God easily accessible to the friends and of holding regular deepening classes where the Teachings can be studied and discussed; the vital necessity of prayer, and the value of holding gatherings for dawn prayers where and when feasible; the proper holding of Nineteen Day Feasts and the observance of Bahá'í Holy Days and anniversaries; the need to pay particular attention to the education of children; and the value of organizing social gatherings, such as picnics, encouraging the friends to associate together and with their non-Bahá'í friends in love and fragrance.

Consolidation activities promote the individual spiritual development of the friends, help to unite and strengthen Bahá'í community life, establish new social patterns for the friends, and stimulate the teaching work.

Bahá'í Literature

The question of making the Sacred Texts available to the friends is so important that the House of Justice commissioned a special committee a year or so ago to prepare three compilations from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These compilations have already been sent to all National Spiritual Assemblies for publication in vernacular languages.

Recently, the House of Justice instructed that a compilation in the form of a small booklet be prepared for use by the friends, especially in areas where literature is not easily available in print. A copy of this compilation, which consists of basic prayers and passages from the Writings, will soon be sent to you. It would be highly desirable for every believer to have easy access to at least a compilation of this type in a language he can understand, and it is sincerely hoped that by the reading of the Sacred Texts and the exposure of the believer's soul to their influence, his spiritual growth will be stimulated. He will thereby not only increase his own spiritual joy and understanding, but also contribute to the consolidation of the entire community.

The Bahá'í Family

Another aspect of Bahá'í life emphasized in the provisions of the Seven Year Plan is the development of the Bahá'í family life. If the believer is the only one of his family who has embraced the Faith, it is his duty to endeavor to lead as many other family members as possible to the light of divine guidance. As soon as a Bahá'í family unit emerges, the members should feel responsible for making the collective life of the family a spiritual reality, animated by divine love and inspired by the ennobling principles of the Faith. To achieve this purpose, the reading of the Sacred Writings and prayers should ideally become a daily family activity. As far as the teaching work is concerned, just as individuals are called upon to adopt teaching goals, the family itself could adopt its own goals. In this way the friends could make of their families strong healthy units, bright candles for the diffusion of the light of the Kingdom, and powerful centers to attract the heavenly confirmations.

Recognition of the Faith

In the goals assigned to National Spiritual Assemblies, no specific reference has been made to goals for the recognition of the Bahá'í marriage certificate and of Bahá'í Holy Days, for the incorporation of Local Spiritual Assemblies, or for the obtaining of exemptions from state and municipal taxes on Bahá'í properties. Conditions in every country differ, and it is the duty of every National Spiritual Assembly to consider carefully the means whereby it can continually increase the degree of recognition officially accorded to Bahá'í institutions. It is important that any accomplishments in this vital area be reported to the World Center when National Spiritual Assemblies submit their semi-annual statistical reports.

The process of obtaining added recognition for the Faith can be stimulated if National Assemblies give adequate attention in their work to the ever-present need to continually foster cordial relations with government officials. Many of these officials have but a scanty and sometimes faulty knowledge of the Faith, and there is no doubt that when they become familiar with our aims and tenets and are assured of their beneficent effect on their society, they will be well-disposed to accord the Faith and its institutions at least such rights and privileges as are given to other religious organizations in the country.

Mass Media

The importance of mass media to Bahá'í proclamation has risen sharply in past years, and acutely so since the crisis in Iran. Mass media, and particularly radio, have proven to be potent instruments for the deepening of the friends and the promotion of the teaching work in mass teaching areas. Thus in the second phase of the Plan, 92 National Spiritual Assemblies have been given goals calling for increased use of the mass media. Countries not included in the list are those where the use of mass media for Bahá'í purposes is not permitted, or where the friends are already so actively engaged in such projects that they did not need the inclusion of such a goal in their assignments.

It is important for National Spiritual Assemblies generally to be aware that the use of mass media is becoming international in scope and that there is a need for National Spiritual Assemblies to share materials, methods, and experiences, and even personnel, in order to achieve best results.

In order to facilitate this exchange of information about the promotion of the Bahá'í work through radio and television, as well as about the availability of audiovisual materials, the Universal House of Justice, as it has been announced already, has established the International Bahá'í Audio-Visual Center (IBAVC) now in Toronto, Canada. This Center can be called upon by National Spiritual Assemblies for program materials and for advice on personnel training.

Every National Spiritual Assembly engaged in the teaching work in rural areas, where means of communication are scarce, is strongly advised to consider the possibility of applying for radio time on the local radio station, provided the cost is not too high. It may be possible to obtain such time in certain areas free of charge, especially when such a privilege is given to other groups or religions, or when the radio station is anxious to fill its time with worthwhile and helpful programs.

The House of Justice feels that in countries where the doors of publicity are open to the friends, every effort should be made to make the most of the attention being drawn to the Faith by the present situation, and exploit fully the potential for enlisting large numbers under the banner of the Cause.

Newsletters

The dissemination of Bahá'í news, local, national, and international, should be pursued with added vigor. Bahá'í newsletters should be issued regularly to the friends, however great the sacrifice, for news of Bahá'í activities in other communities has always been a source of encouragement and has given the friends a sense of belonging to a vital, growing, and united worldwide Bahá'í family.

In some areas, it may be found that more than one newsletter is necessary in order to reach all the friends with news about the work of the Faith. According to reports received at the World Center, a number of National Assemblies, in addition to issuing a national news bulletin, have made provisions for their Teaching Committees to issue regional or district newsletters in languages understood by the friends. Indeed, many a Local Spiritual Assembly has its own newsletter to ensure that information about developments of the Cause can reach every believer.

Marriages, Births, Burials

Local Spiritual Assemblies, which are embryonic Local Houses of Justice, should develop as rallying centers of the community. They must concern themselves not only with teaching the Faith, with the development of the Bahá'í way of life and with the proper organization of the Bahá'í activities of their communities, but also with those crucial events which profoundly affect the life of all human beings: birth, marriage, and death. When a Bahá'í couple has a child it is a matter of joy to the whole local community as well as to the couple, and each Local Spiritual Assembly should be encouraged to keep a register of such births, issuing a birth certificate to the parents. Such a practice will foster the consolidation of the community and of the Assembly itself. Even if only one of the parents is a Bahá'í, the Assembly could register the birth of the child, and upon application of the Bahá'í parent, issue the certificate.

The carrying out of the Bahá'í marriage laws, as given to the friends throughout the world, is a vital obligation of every believer who wishes to marry, and it is an important duty of every Local Spiritual Assembly to ensure that these laws are known to, and obeyed by, the believers within their jurisdiction, whether or not the Bahá'í marriage ceremony is recognized by civil law. Each Assembly, therefore, must conscientiously carry out its responsibilities in connection with the holding of Bahá'í marriage ceremonies, the recording of Bahá'í marriages in a register kept for this purpose, and the issuing of Bahá'í marriage certificates.

The burial of the dead is an occasion of great solemnity and importance, and while the conduct of the funeral service and the arrangements for the interment may be left to the relatives of the deceased, the Local Spiritual Assembly has the responsibility for educating the believers in the essential requirements of the Bahá'í law of burial as at present applied, and in courteously and tactfully drawing these requirements to the attention of the relatives if there is any indication that they may fail to observe them. These requirements are: that the body not be cremated; that it not be transported more than an hour's journey from the place of death to the place of burial; that the Prayer for the Dead be recited if the deceased is a Bahá'í of fifteen years of age or more; and that the funeral be carried out in a simple and dignified manner that would be a credit to the community.

In some parts of the world, if Local Spiritual Assemblies fail to carry out these sacred duties, some believers might gradually drift away from the Faith and even pay dues to churches or other religious organizations to ensure that, when they require to register the birth of a child, to solemnize a marriage or to have a funeral service, there will be a religious institution ready to perform the necessary services. Conversely, when Local Assemblies have arisen to carry out these responsibilities, the believers have acquired a sense of security and solidarity, and have become confident that in such matters they can rely upon the agencies of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

Education of Children

The House of Justice has noted with deep gratification the increased number of Local Spiritual Assemblies which are organizing Bahá'í classes for children. In order to make these classes effective, it is important to have a graduated system of lesson plans suited to different age groups. Usually, such material is prepared by each National Spiritual Assembly in the manner suited to its conditions. However, to assist National Assemblies in benefiting from the fruits of the labors of Bahá'ís in other countries, we have been asked to inform you that the National Spiritual Assemblies of Colombia, India, Malaysia, and the United States have reported the availability of literature prepared by them for this purpose. You should feel free to correspond with these National Spiritual Assemblies.

Regarding tutorial schools, some National Assemblies engaged in this activity have reported excellent results, which have helped both in the expansion work and in the consolidation of the Faith. A report on this type of activity has recently been received at the World Center, and a digest

of the report is attached for the study of those National Assemblies who have been assigned this goal.

Pioneers

Certain National Spiritual Assemblies have been assigned the goal of raising self-supporting homefront pioneers. This activity has great potential for the spread and consolidation of the Faith, and it is the hope of the House of Justice that this type of service will be encouraged in all national communities, including those which have not been given this goal.

In addition to homefront pioneers, there is a need for 279 pioneers to settle in 80 countries and islands of the world. A list of these pioneer needs is attached, and it is hoped that the required number of dedicated souls will arise to fill the posts that are in need of pioneer support. It is suggested that National Assemblies keep in close touch with the Continental Pioneer Committees, who will be in a position to keep National Assemblies informed of progress towards these goals.

Continental Pioneer Committees

Continental Pioneer Committees working in close collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies are assuming greater importance as the work of the Faith unfolds on every continent. The House of Justice is writing to all Continental Pioneer Committees, outlining their added responsibilities in relation both to the newly formed Continental Boards of Counselors and the National Spiritual Assemblies. It is the hope of the House of Justice that the services of these important Continental Committees will in the future be made available to the friends with ever-greater effectiveness.

The Universal House of Justice has asked us to assure you of its prayers for the blessings of Bahá'u'lláh to confirm your efforts as you face the next three years with optimism and confidence, and respond to the challenging opportunities ahead with determination and vigor.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Bahá'í Tutorial Schools: An Example

(Summarized from a report received concerning the functioning of such schools in a particular country)

Special Conditions

The Bahá'í tutorial schools in this country are called "Bahá'í Educational Centers" to prevent confusion with the schools supported by the State and managed by the Department of National Education. They were established in part in response to the goal assigned during the last Plan, to deepen at least one person in each Bahá'í locality to assist in consolidating the community and the Local Spiritual Assemblies. This need was felt particularly because in many of the villages, Bahá'í activities take place only during visits from pioneers or other visitors from the large cities.

Definition

"The Bahá'í Educational Center is a place where Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í children and adults receive, under the direction of their Local Spiritual Assemblies, first a spiritual education, then a basic literacy education, and finally a technical education such as training in crafts. This is also a center [for] numerous other social activities for youth and women. The purpose is to obtain quasi-universal participation of the whole village."

Relationship to Government

The Centers "are allowed to function on the provincial level by the [Government] Department of Social Affairs, which was seeking every possible means to provide literacy education for the masses. The authorities of that Department are so happy with the development of these

Educational Centers which cost them nothing that they gave permission to award certificates of participation in these courses, signed, on the one hand, by themselves and, on the other hand, by the Local Spiritual Assembly concerned, which acts as the principal. For their part, the chiefs of villages also stated that when a Local Spiritual Assembly wants an Educational Center, they will themselves erect huts in which classes may be held and encourage all the children to attend day classes and adults evening classes." The chiefs also witness the signing of the contract between the volunteer teachers (see below) and the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Teachers

The teachers are Bahá'í volunteers, "often youth almost illiterate themselves who, after some time of unemployment in large cities, return disheartened to their native village but they become important when they are engaged in Educational Centers." These teachers sign an official contract with the Local Assembly before the chief of the civil community, who represents the tribe, stating that they are volunteers and will not demand any salary later on. "The teacher is recompensed by the Local Spiritual Assembly, which either provides labor to raise crops for him, provides him with food through pupils' contributions, or gives him financial assistance according to each particular case."

In addition, local villagers may offer to teach practical subjects in which they are knowledgeable (e.g., weaving of baskets or mats, canoe building, fishing, pottery, "cure by medicinal plants," etc.) (See below, "PROGRAM.")

Books and Materials

A committee assists the Local Assemblies in the preparation of programs and teaching materials. Books and materials are now in preparation, and are being adapted to the "low instructional level of the teachers. This material will permit them to deepen themselves so that they may maintain a higher level than their pupils." Basic books for the teacher's use and such materials as chalk are bought by the Local Spiritual Assembly; materials for each pupil are bought by the parents at a wholesale price offered by the committee.

Registration and Fees

Fees are set by each Local Spiritual Assembly. At the time of registration, which may take place at 3-month, 6-month or yearly intervals according to the decision of the Local Assembly, a registration card is issued to each pupil.

Program

The program includes three parts: a "spiritual part which includes the teachings and laws, history of the Faith, and Bahá'í administration, all adapted to the level of each class;" a program which "includes basic literacy and general knowledge. This level will develop into post-literacy and permanent education in order to attain more advanced levels of evening classes, high school and even university." The third part "is the apprenticeship in crafts or other trades useful in the development of the village. Any villager can offer to teach crafts or trades in which he is knowledgeable: for instance, weaving of baskets and mats ... fishing, cure by medicinal plants, pottery, embroidery, etc..."

The schedule of courses is determined by the Local Spiritual Assembly, which takes into account harvest and fishing seasons, Nineteen Day Feasts and Bahá'í Holy Days, national holidays, and the like.

The duration of the program is not yet determined, but the first literacy phase is expected to last approximately two years, to be followed by "post-literacy and permanent education, and even to university."

Results to Date

Effects already seen in various Local Assembly areas include the following:

1. The Assemblies are obliged to meet, and are thus strengthened.
2. Educational activities for children are established.
3. Youth activities, “such as playgrounds, choirs, lectures, homefront pioneers, team teaching and others,” are organized.
4. Women’s activities, “such as embroidery, sewing, hygiene, study of the importance of children’s education, etc.,” are organized.
5. “A more universal participation of the whole village in the spiritual activities, such as prayers, Nineteen Day Feast, contribution to the fund, teaching, etc.”
6. “Increase and expansion” in the number of believers.
7. “Great prestige in the eyes of the government for the Bahá’í education.”

Proposals for Future Developments

1. Recording of prayers, Holy Writings, and songs on tapes, to be used as deepening material;
2. Recording on a local basis by the believers, with duplication of tapes for use by other Educational Centers;
3. Radio broadcasts addressed directly to Bahá’í Educational Centers, either through the establishment of a radio station or through rental of time on existing stations;
4. Creation of an audiovisual center able to adapt material to the needs of the development of the Educational Centers;
5. A regional bulletin dealing with the needs of the “post-literacy” students;
6. Publication of a book on the Messengers of God in the major languages of the country, intended for the Educational Center but which could then also be sold to “lay schools” for countrywide distribution;
7. Construction of durable buildings for the Educational Centers;
8. A mobile institute for the training of teachers.