

The Universal House of Justice

9 January 2001

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counselors

Dearly loved Friends,

Five years ago, we called on the body of Counselors assembled in the Holy Land to aid the Bahá'í world to understand and shoulder the challenges of systematic growth. The brilliant achievements of the Four Year Plan testify to the wholehearted response they made. Today, we ask for an equally great effort on your part, this time to ensure the successful launching of the Five Year Plan.

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 Center, 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 endeavors 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.

Advancing the process of entry by troops will continue as the aim of the Five Year Plan—indeed the aim of the series of Plans that will carry the community to the end of the first century of the Formative Age. The acceleration of this vital process will be achieved through systematic activity on the part of the three participants in the Plan: the individual believer, the institutions, and the community.

The Training Institute

A searching analysis of the Four Year Plan recently prepared for us by the International Teaching Centre demonstrates that the training institute is effective not only in enhancing the powers of the individual, but also in vitalizing communities and institutions. The continued development of training institutes in the diverse countries and territories of the world, then, must be a central feature of the new Plan.

Drawing on the wealth of experience now accumulated in this area of endeavor, institutes will have to provide their communities with a constant stream of human resources to serve the process of entry by troops. Elements of a system that can meet the training needs of large numbers of believers have already been tested worldwide and have proven themselves. Study circles, reinforced by extension courses and special campaigns, have shown their ability to lend structure to the process of spiritual education at the grassroots. The value of a sequence of courses, each one following the other in a logical pattern and each one building on the achievements of the previous ones, has become abundantly clear. Various models are emerging that provide insight into how such sequences can be used to create training programs. In one example the main sequence, much like the trunk of a tree, supports courses branching out from it, each branch dedicated to some specific area of training. In another, several tracks of courses, each

with its own focus, run parallel. Institutes will do well to examine these elements and approaches and employ them in a manner that responds to the opportunities before them.

At the outset of the Twelve Month Plan we underscored the need for Bahá'í children to be nurtured spiritually and to be integrated into the life of the Cause. There is every indication from the response of the friends thus far that a raised awareness of the importance of child education will, in fact, be a hallmark of this brief yet significant Plan. A new impetus has been given to Bahá'í children's classes. Increased awareness has also brought to light opportunities to offer moral and spiritual education to children in general, as exemplified by the success of the efforts to introduce courses on the Bahá'í Faith into programs of official school systems.

That institutes are placing more and more emphasis on the training of teachers for children's classes is a particularly encouraging sign. Other measures are equally essential if regular classes for every age are to be offered in Bahá'í communities throughout the world. In some countries, national and regional committees have been established to assist Local Spiritual Assemblies in the discharge of their responsibility to educate children. In these, the relationship between the committees and the training institute will steadily evolve as experience is gained, each agency enhancing the work of the other. But there are many countries in which the institute is the only structure developing the capacity to organize and maintain courses in locality after locality. As this approach is working well with youth and adults, and increasingly for junior youth, there is no reason why the training institute should not also shoulder similar responsibility with respect to children, where necessary. As a general rule, institutes do not take on the administration of plans and programs for expansion and consolidation. Conducting children's classes, however, is a unique enterprise, of special urgency. In those countries where the task is given to it, the institute becomes a center of learning intensely engaged in the spiritual education of the friends from the tenderest age through adulthood.

Individual Initiative in Teaching

With the work of institutes growing in strength, attention has now to be given everywhere to systematizing teaching efforts. In the document "The Institution of the Counselors" just issued, we emphasize the role that the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants play in helping the friends to meet this challenge, both at the level of individual initiative and of collective volition. As individuals progress through institute courses, they deepen their knowledge of the Faith, gain insights, and acquire skills of service. Some of the courses devoted to teaching will no doubt treat the subject in general terms. Others will focus on various means of sharing Bahá'u'lláh's message with specific segments of society, incorporating the wisdom gleaned from the teaching endeavors of the friends. This combined process of action, learning and training will endow communities with an ever-increasing number of capable and eager teachers of the Cause.

Training alone, of course, does not necessarily lead to an upsurge in teaching activity. In every avenue of service, the friends need sustained encouragement. Our expectation is that the Auxiliary Board members, together with their assistants, will give special thought to how individual initiative can be cultivated, particularly as it relates to teaching. When training and encouragement are effective, a culture of growth is nourished in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh. They "raise high the sacred torch of faith," as was 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wish, "labor ceaselessly, by day and by night," and "consecrate every fleeting moment of their lives to the diffusion of the divine fragrance and the exaltation of God's holy Word." So enkindled do their hearts become with the fire of the love of God that whoever approaches them feels its warmth. They strive to be channels of the spirit, pure of heart, selfless and humble, possessing certitude and the courage that stems from reliance on God. In such a culture, teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers. Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms.

Systematic Programs of Growth

During the coming months, you will be helping national communities, whose circumstances differ widely, to formulate plans for systematic growth. There are many countries where increased institutional capacity, particularly at the level of the region, now makes it possible to focus attention on smaller geographic areas. Most of these will consist of a cluster of villages and towns, but, sometimes, a large city and its suburbs may constitute an area of this kind. Among the factors that determine the boundaries of a cluster are culture, language, patterns of transport, infrastructure, and the social and economic life of the inhabitants. The areas into which a region divides will fall into various categories of development. Some will not yet be open to the Faith, while others will contain a few isolated localities and groups; in some, established communities will be gaining strength through a vigorous institute process; in a few, strong communities of deepened believers will be in a position to take on the challenges of systematic and accelerated expansion and consolidation.

Once the appropriate categories have been identified, national plans in these countries will need to make provision for the progressive opening of virgin areas through the settlement of homefront pioneers. Such goals can be met with relative ease if pioneers are experienced in institute programs and are able to use their methods and materials in raising up a group of dedicated believers who can carry the work of the Faith forward in the area. Precious indeed will be the privilege of those who, in the remaining years of the first century of the Formative Age, place their trust in God and arise with fervor to take the lead in carrying the light of Divine guidance to every part of their countries. It is our hope that this call for homefront pioneers will generate great enthusiasm among the friends and open before their eyes a new vista of possibilities to serve the Faith.

According to this scheme, national plans will also need to include provision for the strengthening of other areas which, although open to the Faith, have yet to reach the level of development that prepares them for intensive activity. In those areas where strong communities with a corps of deepened believers exist, systematic programs for the expansion and consolidation of the Faith should be established forthwith. We have already indicated that the International Teaching Centre has identified certain patterns of growth appropriate for relatively small geographical areas. Since then, it has analyzed several pilot projects in various parts of the world, and its findings are highly encouraging. The lessons learned now provide a body of experience for the launching of programs for systematic growth in area after area. As you consult on this matter with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils, you will want to keep the Teaching Center informed.

It is important that national communities not rush into establishing intensive programs in an area before conditions are propitious. These conditions include: a high level of enthusiasm among a sizeable group of devoted and capable believers who understand the prerequisites for sustainable growth and can take ownership of the program; some basic experience on the part of a few communities in the cluster in holding classes for the spiritual education of children, devotional meetings, and the Nineteen Day Feast; the existence of a reasonable degree of administrative capacity in at least a few Local Spiritual Assemblies; the active involvement of several assistants to Auxiliary Board members in promoting community life; a pronounced spirit of collaboration among the various institutions working in the area; and above all, the strong presence of the training institute with a scheme of coordination that supports the systematic multiplication of study circles.

Programs initiated in such areas should aim at fostering sustainable growth by building the necessary capacity at the levels of the individual, the institution, and the community. Far from requiring grandiose and elaborate plans, these programs should focus on a few measures that have proven over the years to be indispensable to large-scale expansion and consolidation. Success will depend on the manner in which lines of action are integrated and on the attitude of learning that is adopted. The implementation of such a program will require the close

collaboration of the institute, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, and an Area Teaching Committee.

At the core of the program must lie a sound and steady process of expansion, matched by an equally strong process of human resource development. A range of teaching efforts needs to be carried out, involving both activities undertaken by the individual and campaigns promoted by the institutions. As the number of believers in the area rises, a significant percentage should receive training from the institute, and their capabilities be directed towards the development of local communities.

Our message of 26 December 1995 delineating the features of the Four Year Plan made reference to the stages through which a community passes as it develops. The experience that has been gained in the ensuing years in working with communities at various stages will prove valuable to programs of growth. One of the first steps in implementing the program may well be a survey to determine the condition of each locality in the area. Among the initial goals for every community should be the establishment of study circles, children's classes, and devotional meetings, open to all the inhabitants of the locality. The observance of the Nineteen Day Feast has to be given due weight, and consistent effort should be made to strengthen the Local Spiritual Assemblies. Once communities are able to sustain the basic activities of Bahá'í life, a natural way to further their consolidation is to introduce small projects of social and economic development—for example, a literacy project, a project for the advancement of women or environmental preservation, or even a village school. As strength builds, the responsibility for an increasing number of lines of action is to be devolved onto the Local Spiritual Assemblies.

Throughout the endeavor, periodic meetings of consultation in the area need to reflect on issues, consider adjustments, and maintain enthusiasm and unity of thought. The best approach is to formulate plans for a few months at a time, beginning with one or two lines of action and gradually growing in complexity. Those who are actively involved in the implementation of plans, whether members of the institutions or not, should be encouraged to participate fully in the consultations. Other area-wide gatherings will also be necessary. Some of these will provide opportunity for the sharing of experience and further training. Others will focus on the use of the arts and the enrichment of culture. Together, such gatherings will support an intense process of action, consultation and learning.

The friends who participate in these intensive programs of growth should bear in mind that the purpose is to ensure that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh reaches the masses of humanity and enables them to achieve spiritual and material progress through the application of the Teachings. Vast numbers among the peoples of the world are ready, indeed yearn, for the bounties that Bahá'u'lláh alone can bestow upon them once they have committed themselves to building the new society He has envisioned. In learning to systematize their large-scale teaching work, Bahá'í communities are becoming better equipped to respond to this longing. They cannot withhold whatever effort, whatever sacrifice, may be called for.

A Spiritual Enterprise

Clearly, the scheme described here, while suitable to many national communities, cannot be applied in every situation. We count on the ability of the Bahá'í institutions to create plans which, if not reflecting the total scheme above, will incorporate elements of its vision, according to the circumstances of each national community. Bahá'í communities are, of course, engaged in a range of indispensable endeavors such as public information activity, proclamation efforts, external affairs work, production of literature, and complex social and economic development projects. Most certainly, as plans are devised, they will also address these challenges.

The nature of the planning process with which you will be helping the friends is in many ways unique. At its core it is a spiritual process in which communities and institutions strive to align their pursuits with the Will of God. The Major Plan of God is at work and the forces it

generates impel humanity towards its destiny. In their own plans of action, the institutions of the Faith must seek to gain insight into the operation of these great forces, explore the potentialities of the people they serve, measure the resources and strengths of their communities, and take practical steps to enlist the unreserved participation of the believers. The nurturing of this process is the sacred mission entrusted to you. We have every confidence in your ability to achieve it. May Bahá'u'lláh bless and sustain you through His unfailing grace and mighty confirmations.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]