

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

17 May 2009

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

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

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

Decentralization of the Feast in urban centres

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

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

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

for believers newly enrolled in the community, the desire to assume responsibility for the affairs of the Faith is cultivated more readily in gatherings close to home, in a familiar environment.

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

Choice of language

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

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

Attendance of those who are not Bahá'ís

The Nineteen Day Feast is an institution of the Cause, which serves, in part, as a means for the Bahá'í community to address its affairs in a full and frank manner, without fear of creating misunderstandings among those unfamiliar with its purpose. It is for this reason that participation is limited to members of the Bahá'í community.

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

Now, with the Plan's framework for action well established in so many places, growing numbers enjoy ready access to Bahá'í community life through the core activities, and there is greatly increased likelihood that those who are close to the Faith will learn about the Nineteen Day Feast and appear at its celebration. The House of Justice has decided that, in such instances,

rather than eliminating the administrative portion completely or asking the visitors to withdraw, those conducting the programme can modify this part of the Feast to accommodate the guests. The sharing of local and national news and information about social events, as well as consultation on topics of general interest, such as the teaching work, service projects, the Fund, and so on, can take place as usual, while discussion of sensitive or problematic issues related to these or other topics can be set aside for another time when the friends can express themselves freely without being inhibited by the presence of visitors.

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

Accumulating experience

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

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

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat