

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

12 December 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

Across the globe Bahá'í communities are intently engaged in executing the provisions of the Five Year Plan. Its opening months now behind us, there is every indication that the study of recent guidance and deliberations on the nature and extent of capacity developed thus far are bearing fruit in focused, highly unified action at the grassroots. Principally through the efforts of homefront pioneers, in several hundred newly opened clusters, the first stirrings of a programme for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can already be felt, while in several hundred more, further along the continuum of growth, a pattern of rigorous activity is taking hold. Meanwhile the friends in those clusters in the forefront of learning are gaining mastery over the dynamics that characterize rapidly expanding, relatively large communities.

In this connection, we are particularly happy to note the degree of effort being exerted in every country to lend an added measure of vitality to the institute process, so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order. The operation of the institute board; the functioning of coordinators at different levels; the capabilities of friends serving as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, teachers of children's classes; and the promotion of an environment conducive at once to universal participation and mutual support and assistance—nowhere is the centrality of these to the fulfilment of the community's God-given mission lost on the friends. What has been especially heartening to observe in this respect is the widespread mobilization of resources dedicated to the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. No less encouraging is the zeal with which institutes have greeted the challenge of preparing teachers for successive grades of Bahá'í children's classes as additional materials for this purpose have been made available. It seems timely, then, to offer National Spiritual Assemblies and their training institutes further guidance on the implementation of the main sequence of courses and those that branch off from it.

The path of service

A number of years ago, to aid the believers in thinking about the process of growth at the level of the cluster, we introduced the concept of two complementary movements. The progress of a steady, ever-widening stream of individuals through the courses of the institute represents one of these. It is not only responsible for giving impetus to the other—the development of the cluster, discernable in the collective capacity to manifest a pattern of life in conformity with the teachings of the Faith—but also dependent on it for its own perpetuation. It was in view of mounting evidence of the effects of the Ruhi Institute curriculum on these two mutually reinforcing movements that we recommended its adoption worldwide six years ago. At the time, we did not comment specifically on the pedagogical principles governing the curriculum; nevertheless, it should be apparent to the friends that the curriculum possesses desirable characteristics, some of which have been described in broad terms in our messages regarding the current series of global Plans. Of particular significance is its organizing principle: developing capacity to serve the Cause and humanity in a process likened to walking a path of service. This conception shapes both content and structure.

The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavour to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is

structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.

At present the main sequence consists of eight courses, though it is understood there may eventually be as many as eighteen that will address acts of service related to such requirements as coordination and administration, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. There are currently two points along the sequence at which an individual may choose to follow a specialized path of service. The first appears at Book 3. From among the friends who complete it and begin to offer a relatively simple class for children in the first grade of a programme for their spiritual education, a percentage will want to dedicate themselves to this field of service, pursuing in time a series of progressively more complex branch courses for teaching Grades 2 to 6. This does not mean that they will abandon study of the main sequence. Indeed, courses that make up a specialized path of service anticipate that participants are continuing to progress, each at a pace suitable to his or her situation, along the path traced out by the main sequence. Book 5, which seeks to raise up animators of junior youth groups, constitutes the second point at which a series of courses branch out.

Additional avenues of exploration will no doubt appear along the main sequence in due time. Some may be of universal interest, such as the two mentioned above, while others may be limited to specific local needs. As with the main sequence itself, content and structure must emerge out of continued collective experience in the field, an experience that is not haphazard or subject to the forces of personal preference but is guided by the institutions of the Faith. The generation of such an experience will call for a still greater infusion of energy from a much larger portion of the population, and it would be premature, in all but a few places, for institutes to give attention to the creation or implementation of other branch courses at this juncture in the unfoldment of the current series of global Plans.

Coordination

Clearly, the approach to capacity building described above represents an attempt to achieve a certain dynamics within a population that brings together service and the generation of knowledge and its diffusion, a subject which we discussed, albeit briefly, in our *Riḍvān* 2010 message. Here we address a few practical considerations, which the emergence of the two aforementioned specialized paths of service has made all the more relevant.

At any given moment it is possible to view from one of two perspectives what occurs in a cluster as the pattern of action promoted by the Five Year Plan, through which is woven the fabric of a vibrant community life, gathers in strength. Both perspectives are equally valid; each offers a particular way of thinking and speaking about what is taking place. From one perspective an educational process with three distinct stages appears in sharp relief: the first for the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults. In this context, one speaks of three educational imperatives, each distinguished by its own methods and materials, each claiming a share of resources, and each served by mechanisms to systematize experience and to generate knowledge based on insights gained in the field. Quite naturally, then, three discussions take shape around the implementation of the programme for the spiritual education of children, the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme, and the main sequence of courses.

From another perspective one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for

example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan. The question of teaching among receptive populations moves to the foreground in this light, and the challenge of seeking out souls who are willing to engage in a conversation about the world around them and participate in a collective effort to transform it comes into focus.

It is especially at the level of coordination that it proves indispensable to step back and view from these two vantage points what is essentially one reality. Doing so makes it possible to analyse accurately, to assess strategically, to allocate wisely, and to avoid fragmentation. At this point, then, early in the execution of the Plan, it seems more vital than ever for attention to be devoted to the issue of coordination. Though the basic elements of an effective organizational scheme are already well understood, the form it should assume under diverse circumstances is in need of articulation. We have asked the International Teaching Centre to follow efforts made in this direction, particularly in the several hundred furthest advanced clusters worldwide, in order to effect the rapid systematization of lessons learned.

In all such clusters, where the demands of large-scale growth are asserting themselves, each stage of the educational process promoted by the training institute must receive added support. The work of the coordinator should be reinforced by assistance from a growing number of experienced individuals, and meetings for the exchange of information and insights become regular and more systematic in approach. So, too, must periodic occasions be created for the three coordinators appointed by the institute—or, where applicable, teams of coordinators concerned with study circles, junior youth groups and children's classes respectively—to examine together the strength of the educational process as a whole. And they, in turn, should meet on a regular basis with the Area Teaching Committee. Further, if an adequate flow of information, guidance and much-needed funds is to reach the cluster, a parallel set of steps will have to be taken by the board of the institute to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.

One final point merits reflection in this respect. Nearly all of the several hundred clusters under consideration are associated with one or another of some forty sites for the dissemination of learning established by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the World Centre in response to the overwhelming demand for the junior youth programme experienced throughout the world. Institutes operating in these clusters have already benefited over the past year from knowledge gained through the sites, particularly in relation to coordination of the programme. Without question, the capacity to sustain scores of junior youth groups lent a powerful impetus to the progress of all such clusters and contributed decisively to the subsequent development of study circles and children's classes. Sites supported by the Office of Social and Economic Development will continue to assist training institutes in addressing the complex set of questions arising out of the implementation of a programme for an age group whose enormous potential must remain the object of ongoing exploration. We look to the institutes themselves, however, to foster the learning process necessary to manage large numbers of children's classes and study circles, to put in place a scheme at the cluster level that will strengthen coordination across their three defined areas of action, and to open the flow of resources from the regional level into the grassroots—this, to ensure the seamless progression of sizeable contingents from one stage of the educational process to the next and to facilitate the steady unfoldment of cycles of activity so essential to systematic growth.

Classes for children

Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses. The units that comprise the three books currently available contain both materials for study by teachers and

lessons for children, allowing institutes to establish without delay the first three grades of a six-year programme. To raise up an initial corps of teachers for these grades, they may well have to employ temporary measures. A good scheme of coordination, built incrementally in keeping with demands on the ground, should make it possible to respond to exigencies with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the integrity of the overall educational process in the long term.

Besides the systematic training of teachers for successive grades, institutes will need to learn about the formation of classes for distinct age groups in villages and neighbourhoods; the provision of teachers for various classes; the retention of students year after year, grade after grade; and the continued progress of children from a wide variety of households and backgrounds—in short, the establishment of an expanding, sustainable system for child education that will keep pace with both the growing concern among parents for their youngsters to develop sound moral structures and the rise in human resources in the community. The task, while immense, is relatively straightforward, and we urge institutes everywhere to give it the attention which it so clearly deserves, focusing especially on the implementation of the first three grades of the programme and remembering that the quality of the teaching-learning experience depends, to a great extent, on the capabilities of the teacher.

A word of caution seems to be in order. It is certainly not incorrect to speak of “training” children’s class teachers or, for that matter, animators of junior youth groups. Institutes, however, ought to take care, lest they begin to perceive their work as training in techniques, losing sight of the conception of capacity building at the heart of the institute process that entails a profound understanding of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

Educational materials

In light of the foregoing paragraphs, the question of educational materials specifically as they pertain to children’s classes and to junior youth groups has to be considered. With regard to the former, we explained in our Ridván 2010 message that the lessons prepared by the Ruhi Institute would constitute the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements could be organized. Whether or not any additional elements are required to reinforce the educational process for each grade would generally be determined by teachers themselves, on the basis of specific circumstances, not infrequently in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level. It is assumed that, if found to be appropriate, any additional items would be selected from resources readily available. There will seldom be cause to formalize the use of such items, whether directly through their adoption by training institutes or indirectly through their widespread systematic promotion.

In the case of junior youth groups, a similar approach is encouraged by the Office of Social and Economic Development. The core of the programme consists of a series of textbooks studied by the groups. We understand that, at present, seven of a projected eighteen textbooks, exploring a range of themes from a Bahá’í perspective, though not in the mode of religious instruction, are available. These form the major component of a three-year programme. Another nine textbooks will provide a distinctly Bahá’í component, and two of these are currently in use. Animators are advised to complement study with artistic activities and service projects. As with children’s class teachers, the institute coordinator at the cluster level can offer animators assistance in determining how to proceed. Yet, most often, such projects and activities are selected by the junior youth themselves, in light of their own circumstances and inclinations, in consultation with the group’s animator.

In all such matters, those serving as teachers and animators alike are called upon to exercise discretion. Education is a vast field, and educational theories abound. Surely many have considerable merit, but it should be remembered that none is free of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. An educational process should, for example, create in a child awareness of his or her potentialities, but the glorification of self has to be scrupulously avoided.

So often in the name of building confidence the ego is bolstered. Similarly, play has its place in the education of the young. Children and junior youth, however, have proven time and again their capacity to engage in discussions on abstract subjects, undertaken at a level appropriate to their age, and derive great joy from the serious pursuit of understanding. An educational process that dilutes content in a mesmerizing sea of entertainment does them no service. We trust that, in studying the institute courses, teachers and animators will find themselves increasingly equipped to make judicious decisions in selecting any materials or activities necessary, whether from traditional educational sources or from the wealth of items, such as songs, stories, and games, that are sure to be developed for the young in the Bahá'í community in the years to come.

Propelled by forces generated both within and outside the Bahá'í community, the peoples of the earth can be seen to be moving from divergent directions, closer and closer to one another, towards what will be a world civilization so stupendous in character that it would be futile for us to attempt to imagine it today. As this centripetal movement of populations accelerates across the globe, some elements in every culture, not in accord with the teachings of the Faith, will gradually fall away, while others will be reinforced. By the same token, new elements of culture will evolve over time as people hailing from every human group, inspired by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, give expression to patterns of thought and action engendered by His teachings, in part through artistic and literary works. It is with such considerations in mind that we welcome the decision of the Ruhi Institute, in formulating its courses, to leave for the friends to address locally issues related to artistic activity. What we ask at this stage, then, when energies are to be invested in the extension of children's classes and junior youth groups, is that the multiplication of supplementary items for this purpose be allowed to occur naturally, as an outgrowth of the process of community building gathering momentum in villages and neighbourhoods. We long to see, for instance, the emergence of captivating songs from every part of the world, in every language, that will impress upon the consciousness of the young the profound concepts enshrined in the Bahá'í teachings. Yet such an efflorescence of creative thought will fail to materialize, should the friends fall, however inadvertently, into patterns prevalent in the world that give licence to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted. Further, every effort should be made to protect spiritual education from the perils of commercialization. The Ruhi Institute itself has explicitly discouraged the proliferation of products and items that treat its identity as a brand to be marketed. We hope that the friends will respect its diligence in this matter.

In this connection, it gives us pleasure to inform you that we have created an International Advisory Board to assist the Ruhi Institute in overseeing its system for the preparation, production, and distribution of materials, the content and structure of which now draw extensively on Bahá'í experience worldwide in applying the teachings and principles of the Faith to the life of humanity. As it gradually takes up its work, the Board will be able to respond to related issues and follow the development of supplementary materials that are aligned with the direction set by the global Plans.

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In closing, we feel compelled to address a few words to training institutes throughout the world: It should be remembered that the Bahá'í children's class teacher and the junior youth group animator, entrusted with so much responsibility for strengthening the moral foundations of the community, will, in most places, be a young person in his or her teens. Increasingly these young people will emerge, it can be expected, from the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme imbued with a strong twofold purpose, both to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society. But they may also come from any one of a number of educational backgrounds with all the hope in their hearts that, through strenuous concerted effort,

the world will change. Irrespective of particulars, they will, one and all, share in the desire to dedicate their time and energy, talents and abilities, to service to their communities. Many, when given the opportunity, will gladly devote a few years of their lives to the provision of spiritual education to the rising generations. In the young people of the world, then, lies a reservoir of capacity to transform society waiting to be tapped. And the release of this capacity should be regarded by every institute as a sacred charge.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]