

The Universal House of Justice

29 December 2015

To the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

The Plan upon which the Bahá'í world embarked nearly five years ago is in its closing stages; the final tally of its accomplishments grows still, but will soon be sealed. The collective effort it inspired has called for wholehearted reliance on those powers with which a benevolent Lord has endowed His loved ones. Gathered with you at this moment of reflection, we are conscious of a determination among the friends to bring the current Plan to a fitting conclusion, and of an eagerness to advance further along the path that experience has marked out.

The considerable distance already travelled along that path is evident from the present Plan's most striking outcomes. The ambitious goal of raising to 5,000 the number of clusters where a programme of growth, at whatever level of intensity, is under way looks set to be achieved in the months that remain before Ridván 2016. In many scores of clusters, there are over a thousand inhabitants—sometimes several thousand—taking part in a well-established pattern of activity that embraces ever-larger numbers, raising communities whose habits of thought and action are rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Worldwide, half a million individuals have now been enabled to complete at least the first book in the sequence of courses, an extraordinary feat that has laid a sure foundation for the system of human resource development. A generation of youth is being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world. Marvelling at what they have seen, leaders of society in certain places are pressing the Bahá'ís to make their programmes for educating the young widely available. Faced with increasing complexity, Bahá'í institutions and their agencies are finding ways to organize the activities of rising numbers of friends by promoting collaboration and mutual support. And the capacity for learning, which represented such a priceless legacy of previous Plans, is being extended beyond the realm of expansion and consolidation to encompass other areas of Bahá'í endeavour, notably social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. We see a community fortified with the gifts of strength and hard-won experience that come from two decades of unremitting effort focused on a common aim: a significant advance in the process of entry by troops.

That this process must go much further, there can be no doubt; nevertheless, developments demonstrate that a significant advance has already occurred. It has prepared the friends of God for a more exacting test of their capabilities, one that will also make great demands of your institution as you rally them to meet its requirements. In this coming Plan, which will conclude at the threshold of the second century of the Formative Age of the Faith, we will call the believers everywhere to the immense exertion necessary to bring to fruition the seeds that have been so lovingly and assiduously sown and watered in the five Plans that preceded it.

The emergence of a programme of growth

The unfoldment of the process of growth in a cluster, while naturally possessing unique features in every instance shaped by the receptivity of those who are exposed to the divine teachings, conforms to certain shared characteristics. Many of these were discussed in our message to your 2010 conference, in which reference was made to a series of milestones that mark progress along a path of development. A collective understanding of what is required for the friends in a cluster to pass the first of the milestones we described, and then the second, has grown over this period.

In the Five Year Plan now ending, the task facing the believers has been to apply all that had been learned from previous Plans to the work of extending the process of growth to thousands of

new clusters. What this has shown is that much depends on the ability of the institutions to draw on help from friends in other clusters, reinforcing the actions of an existing Bahá'í community by, for example, arranging the support of visiting teaching teams or tutors. In many places, the institute process begins with the assistance of believers from stronger neighbouring communities who find creative ways of reaching out to the local population, youth in particular, and supporting them as they start to engage in service. Efforts to stimulate activity in a cluster, especially one that has not yet been opened to the Faith, are greatly enhanced if one or more individuals settle there as homefront pioneers, concentrating their attention on part of a village or even a single street where there is heightened receptivity. Well over 4,500 believers have already arisen to serve in this way during the present Plan, an astonishing accomplishment.

Whatever the combination of strategies used, the chief aim is to initiate a process for building capacity within the cluster through which its inhabitants, prompted by a wish to contribute to the spiritual and material well-being of their communities, are enabled to begin offering acts of service. Once this fundamental requirement is met, a programme of growth has emerged. Essential, of course, is the support of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants, whose close involvement from the first stirrings of activity helps the friends to maintain a clear and united vision of what is needed.

Strengthening the pattern of action

Before long, there forms a nucleus of friends in a cluster who are working and consulting together and arranging activities. For the process of growth to advance further, the number of people sharing this commitment must rise, and their capacity for undertaking systematic action within the framework of the Plan must correspondingly increase. And similar to the development of a living organism, growth can occur quickly when the right conditions are in place.

Foremost among these conditions is an institute process gaining in strength, given its centrality to fostering the movement of populations. The friends who have begun studying institute materials, and are also investing their energies in organizing children's classes, junior youth groups, gatherings for collective worship, or other related activities, are being assisted to proceed further through the sequence of courses, while the number of those starting their study continues to rise. With the flow of participants through institute courses and into the field of action being maintained, the company of those who are sustaining the growth process expands. Progress relies to a large extent on the quality of the efforts of those serving as tutors. At this early stage, most of them might still be drawn from other clusters, but at the same time, a few local friends are being raised up who, as their capacity for action increases, begin to help others study the materials of the institute. Efforts to usher in the first cadre of tutors from the cluster should steer a path between two undesirable outcomes. If individuals proceed through the courses of the institute too hastily, the capacity to serve is not sufficiently developed; conversely, if study is overly prolonged, the process is robbed of the dynamism essential to its advancement. In differing circumstances, creative solutions have been used to achieve the necessary balance, ensuring that, within a reasonable period, some among those residing in a cluster are enabled to serve as tutors.

Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with some experience increases consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time. Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path.

Where the institute is concerned, the flow of participants through its courses creates a growing need for them to be systematically supported as they begin serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors. Opportunities naturally arise for those among the core of believers who have already gained a measure of experience in the educational activities to assist those who are newer to them. An individual's readiness to help others move forward in their efforts to serve might lead to specific responsibilities being assigned to him or her. In this manner, coordinators of each of the three stages of the educational process gradually emerge as needs demand. Their actions are always motivated by a desire to see capacity develop in others and to foster friendships founded on cooperation and reciprocity.

Clearly, the institute process raises capacity for a broad range of undertakings; from the earliest courses, participants are encouraged to visit their friends at their homes and study a prayer together or share with them a theme from the Bahá'í teachings. Arrangements for supporting the friends in these endeavours, which may have been largely informal, eventually prove inadequate, signalling the need for an Area Teaching Committee to appear. Its principal focus is the mobilization of individuals, often through the formation of teams, for the continued spread of the pattern of activity in a cluster. Its members come to see everyone as a potential collaborator in a collective enterprise, and they appreciate their own part in nurturing a spirit of common purpose in the community. With a Committee in place, the efforts already under way to convene gatherings for worship, to carry out home visits, and to teach the Faith can now expand considerably. You will need to encourage National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, as much as training institutes, to remain alert to when conditions in a cluster call for organizational arrangements to assume a definite shape—neither acting prematurely nor unduly delaying the appearance of formal structures.

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. Your auxiliaries' support for this work will ensure that each element of the growth process attains the requisite characteristics and that the integrity and coherence of all the endeavours are maintained.

The impulse to learn through action is, of course, present among the friends from the very start. The introduction of quarterly cycles of activity capitalizes on this emerging capacity and allows it to be steadily reinforced. Although this capacity is specifically associated with the reflection and planning phase of a cycle, especially the reflection gathering that regulates its pulsating heartbeat, it also comes to be exercised at all other points of the cycle by those pursuing related lines of action. We note that, as learning accelerates, the friends grow more capable of overcoming setbacks, whether small or large—diagnosing their root causes, exploring the underlying principles, bringing to bear relevant experience, identifying remedial steps, and assessing progress, until the process of growth has been fully reinvigorated.

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the individual and collective transformation effected through the agency of the Word of God. From the beginning of the sequence of courses, a participant encounters Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation in considering such weighty themes as worship, service to humanity, the life of the soul, and the education of children and youth. As a person cultivates the habit of study and deep reflection upon the Creative Word, this process of transformation reveals itself in an ability to express one's understanding of profound concepts and to explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance. These capacities are visible not only in the elevated discussions that increasingly characterize interactions within the community, but in the ongoing conversations that reach well beyond—not least between the Bahá'í youth and their peers—extending to include parents whose daughters and sons are benefiting from the community's programmes of education. Through exchanges of this kind, consciousness of spiritual forces is raised, apparent dichotomies yield to unexpected insights, a sense of unity and common calling is fortified, confidence that a better world can be created is strengthened, and a commitment to action becomes manifest. Such distinctive conversations gradually attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community activities. Themes of faith and certitude surface naturally, prompted by the receptivity and experiences of those involved. What is clear, then, is that as the institute process in a cluster gains momentum, the act of teaching comes to assume greater prominence in the lives of the friends.

As progress continues, the rising capacity for meaningful conversation is harnessed in the plans of the institutions. By the time cycles of activity have formally emerged, this capacity is being further stimulated through the expansion phase that does so much to determine the outcome of each cycle. The precise objectives of each expansion phase vary, of course, depending on conditions in the cluster and the circumstances of the Bahá'í community. In some instances, its main aim is to increase participation in the core activities; in others, readiness to enrol in the Faith is discovered. Conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and the purpose of His mission occur in a variety of settings, including firesides and visits to homes. The actions undertaken during this phase allow abilities developed through studying the relevant institute materials to be exercised and refined. As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause. The approach of working in teams allows the friends to serve together, offer mutual support, and build confidence—but even when carrying out actions individually, they are coordinating their efforts to greater effect. Their focus and investment of time endow this short but decisive phase of the cycle with the intensity it demands. This spirit of high resolve serves to multiply the community's powers, and in each cycle the friends learn to depend more and more on the potent confirmations from the divine realm that their actions attract.

Five years ago, most of the clusters where an intensive programme of growth had been established were those where a reasonable number of Bahá'ís already lived, often geographically spread out. Efforts on the part of those believers to advance the work by inviting the participation of friends, co-workers, extended family, and acquaintances did much to raise the level of activity throughout the cluster. Indeed, widening the circle of participation in this way has become a familiar aspect of Bahá'í life and remains essential. At the same time, experience indicates that, for growth to accelerate through a steady flow of new participants entering the institute process, more is required. The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible.

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in

neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. Over time, the cluster as a whole and its centres of intense activity will infuse one another with the heightened understanding that comes from efforts to apply the teachings in different contexts.

As the friends in a cluster continue to reinforce and expand the community-building activities taking shape around them, it becomes evident that distinctive progress has been made. All the elements of a system necessary for growth to be sustained are now in place. Reaching the second milestone along the continuum of development, which we described to you five years ago, is accompanied by advances qualitative, but also quantitative—such as a rise in the number of those involved in conversations that enable receptivity to be discovered and nurtured, in how many homes are being visited, in core activities and participation, in how many individuals are beginning the sequence of courses or supporting others as they gain the confidence to serve. Attendance at gatherings to mark the Nineteen Day Feast and Bahá'í Holy Days is being fostered by Local Spiritual Assemblies. Such advances are the more visible signs of a much finer development: the gradual spread, within a population, of a pattern of community life based on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. And, naturally, the number of believers grows.

In the last five years, the path that leads to the emergence of an intensive programme of growth has become more readily discernible. It must be earnestly pursued. In the Plan that will commence this Riḍván, we are calling for growth to be accelerated in all clusters where it has begun. Notwithstanding the natural ebb and flow characteristic of an organic process, there should appear a clear arc of progress over the course of twenty cycles. This combined effort should seek to raise the number of clusters where a programme of growth has become intensive to 5,000 by Riḍván 2021.

We set this objective before the Bahá'í world conscious that it is truly formidable; that a herculean labour will be required; that many sacrifices will have to be made. But faced with the plight of a world that suffers more each day bereft of Bahá'u'lláh's elixir, we cannot, in conscience, ask anything less of His devoted followers. God willing, their exertions will prove worthy to crown a hundred years of toil and set the stage for exploits as yet unimagined that must adorn the second century of the Formative Age.

In the coming months, you will be initiating consultations with National Spiritual Assemblies to assess with them the implications that this global goal holds for their respective communities, a process of consultation which has to be quickly extended until it reaches the grassroots. Action must then ensue. We anticipate that progress will be more swiftly achieved in regions where one or more intensive programmes of growth have been sustained for some time, as these offer a valuable source of knowledge and experience and represent a reservoir of human resources as efforts are made to strengthen surrounding areas. Pursuit of this goal will also result in the emergence of new programmes of growth, often in unopened clusters that neighbour those where a significant advance has occurred. Such a flow of assistance finds its origin in the imperatives laid out in the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

Embracing large numbers and managing complexity

Whereas, when a programme of growth is nascent in a cluster, there might be a handful of individuals who are involved in its promotion and those who are participating might come from only several households, by the time a programme has become intensive, these figures, as one would expect, have grown: perhaps tens of individuals active in the work of expansion and consolidation, while those participating might well surpass a hundred. But being able to reach out to large numbers—mobilizing a hundred people or more, whose service connects them with many hundreds or even thousands—requires the capacity to adapt to a substantial increase in complexity.

As the growth process continues to gain intensity, the friends' efforts to engage in meaningful conversations bring them into many social spaces, allowing a wider array of people to become familiar with the teachings and consider seriously the contribution they can make to the betterment of society. In addition, more and more homes are provided as venues for community-building activities, making each a point for the diffusion of the light of divine guidance. The institute process comes to be supported by a growing number of friends serving capably as tutors who, cycle after cycle, offer the full sequence of institute courses between them, at times with marked intensity. Thus, human resource development proceeds with minimal interruption and generates a constantly expanding pool of workers. While it continues to draw on a diverse range of the cluster's inhabitants, those taking its courses in the greatest numbers are often the youth. The transformative effect of studying the Word of God is experienced by the many whose lives are touched in some way by the community's activities. And as the flow of people beginning a path of service swells, considerable progress is made in all aspects of the community-building efforts of the friends. Animators of junior youth groups and teachers of children's classes multiply in number, fuelling an expansion of these two vital programmes. Children are enabled to move from one grade of the classes to another, while groups of junior youth progress from year to year and ground their learning in service to society. Cluster agencies, bolstered by the support of Local Spiritual Assemblies, encourage and foster the natural passage of participants from one stage of the educational process to the next. An educational system with all its component elements, capable of expanding to welcome large numbers, is now firmly rooted within the cluster.

This kind of progress requires the concerted efforts of the friends wherever in the cluster they reside. Nevertheless, experience in the present Plan demonstrates that a pattern of action that is able to embrace large numbers comes chiefly from working to bring more neighbourhoods and villages—places where the convergence of spiritual forces is effecting rapid change within a body of people—to the point where they can sustain intense activity. A core of individuals from within each is assuming responsibility for the process of building capacity in its inhabitants. A broader cross section of the population is being engaged in conversations, and activities are being opened up to whole groups at once—bands of friends and neighbours, troops of youth, entire families—enabling them to realize how society around them can be refashioned. The practice of gathering for collective worship, sometimes for dawn prayers, nurtures within all a much deeper connection with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Prevailing habits, customs, and modes of expression all become susceptible to change—outward manifestations of an even more profound inner transformation, affecting many souls. The ties that bind them together grow more affectionate. Qualities of mutual support, reciprocity, and service to one another begin to stand out as features of an emerging, vibrant culture among those involved in activities. The friends in such locations help the cluster agencies extend the growth process to different parts of the cluster, for they are eager to introduce others to the vision of transformation they have themselves already glimpsed.

In the course of their endeavours, the believers encounter receptivity within distinct populations who represent a particular ethnic, tribal, or other group and who may be concentrated in a small setting or present throughout the cluster and well beyond it. There is much to be learned about the dynamics involved when a population of this kind embraces the

Faith and is galvanized through its edifying influence. We stress the importance of this work for advancing the Cause of God: every people has a share in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and all must be gathered together under the banner of the oneness of humanity. In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort. These individuals will have special insight into those forces and structures in their societies that can, in various ways, reinforce the endeavours under way.

As growth in the cluster advances further, greater demands are being placed on the organizational scheme of the training institute. Additional coordinators are now required, some of whom might focus their efforts on a particular part of the cluster. However, this need not result in another layer of administration. Much can be achieved through collaboration, as coordinators start to work together in teams, sometimes drawing on the help of other capable individuals. The ongoing interactions and exchange of experience within these teams constantly enriches understanding and increases the efficacy of their service. The coordinators are also discovering that their efforts can be much enhanced if the friends serving as teachers of children, as animators, and as tutors who live in close proximity to one another are able to meet in small groups, in the settings where they serve, and assist each other.

Meanwhile, the Area Teaching Committee is rising to a new level of functioning. It is engaged in a more thorough reading of circumstances in the whole cluster: on the one hand, accurately assessing the capacities of the community and the effects being produced by sustained growth, and on the other, understanding the implications of various social realities for community building in the long term. In the plans it makes each cycle, the Committee relies heavily on those shouldering the greatest share of the work of expansion and consolidation, but given that the number of those connected in some way with the pattern of activity is now large, a variety of questions become more pressing: how to mobilize the entire company of believers in support of teaching goals; how to organize systematic home visits to the friends who would benefit from deepening and discussions that connect them with the community; how to strengthen spiritual bonds with the parents of children and junior youth; how to build on the interest of those who have shown goodwill towards the Faith but have yet to take part in its activities. Promoting the widespread holding of devotional meetings is another concern, so that hundreds of people, eventually thousands, are engaged in worship in the company of their households and their neighbours. Ultimately, of course, the Committee looks to continually extend the reach of the community's endeavours so that more and more souls become acquainted with the message of Bahá'u'lláh. In managing the complexities involved in its own work—which includes gathering and analysing statistical data, as well as a diversity of other tasks—the Committee draws on the help of individuals beyond its own members. These complexities also require increasingly close collaboration with Local Spiritual Assemblies.

For its part, and in response to growing numbers attending activities, the Local Assembly is enhancing its capacity to discharge the many responsibilities it carries on behalf of an expanding community. It seeks to create an environment in which all feel encouraged to contribute to the community's common enterprise. It is eager to see the cluster agencies succeed in their plans, and its intimate familiarity with the conditions in its area enables it to foster the development of interacting processes at the local level. With this in mind, it urges the wholehearted participation of the friends in campaigns and meetings for reflection, and it provides material resources and other assistance for initiatives and events being organized in the locality. The Assembly is also attentive to the need for new believers to be nurtured sensitively, considering when and how various dimensions of community life are to be introduced to them. By encouraging their involvement in institute courses, it aims to ensure that from the very beginning they regard themselves as protagonists in a noble endeavour to build the world anew. It sees to it that gatherings for the Nineteen Day Feast, Holy Day commemorations, and Bahá'í elections become opportunities to reinforce the high ideals of the community, strengthen its shared sense of commitment, and fortify its spiritual character. As numbers in the community grow larger, the

Assembly gives thought to when it could be beneficial to decentralize such meetings so as to facilitate ever-greater participation on these important occasions.

A notable characteristic of advanced clusters is a mode of learning that permeates the whole community and acts as a spur to the rise in institutional capacity. Accounts that offer insight into a method, an approach, or a complete process continually flow to and from pockets of activity. The cluster-wide reflection meeting, at which so much of this learning is presented, is often complemented by meetings for smaller areas, which generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending. This sense of collective ownership becomes more apparent from cycle to cycle—the force released by a united body of people taking charge of their spiritual development over generations to come. And as they do so, the support they receive from regional and national Bahá'í institutions and their agencies is experienced as an unceasing flow of love.

A natural outcome of the rise both in resources and in consciousness of the implications of the Revelation for the life of a population is the stirrings of social action. Not infrequently, initiatives of this kind emerge organically out of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme or are prompted by consultations about local conditions that occur at community gatherings. The forms that such endeavours can assume are diverse and include, for example, tutorial assistance to children, projects to better the physical environment, and activities to improve health and prevent disease. Some initiatives become sustained and gradually grow. In various places the founding of a community school at the grassroots has arisen from a heightened concern for the proper education of children and awareness of its importance, flowing naturally from the study of institute materials. On occasion, the efforts of the friends can be greatly reinforced through the work of an established Bahá'í-inspired organization functioning in the vicinity. However humble an instance of social action might be at the beginning, it is an indication of a people cultivating within themselves a critical capacity, one that holds infinite potential and significance for the centuries ahead: learning how to apply the Revelation to the manifold dimensions of social existence. All such initiatives also serve to enrich participation, at an individual and collective level, in prevalent discourses of the wider community. As expected, the friends are being drawn further into the life of society—a development which is inherent in the pattern of action in a cluster from the very start, but which is now much more pronounced.

For the movement of a population to have come this far demonstrates that the process which brought it about is strong enough to achieve and sustain a high degree of participation in all aspects of the capacity-building endeavour and manage the complexity entailed. This is another milestone for the friends to pass, the third in succession since the process of growth in a cluster was begun. It denotes the appearance of a system for extending, in centre after centre, a dynamic pattern of community life that can engage a people—men and women, youth and adults—in the work of their own spiritual and social transformation. This has already come about in around two hundred clusters, covering a range of socio-economic circumstances, and we anticipate that, by the conclusion of the coming Plan, it will be observable in several hundred more. It is a future to which the friends labouring in thousands of clusters elsewhere can aspire.

In some of the clusters where growth has advanced to this extent, an even more thrilling development has occurred. There are locations within these clusters where a significant percentage of the entire population is now involved in community-building activities. For instance, there are small villages where the institute has been able to engage the participation of all the children and junior youth in its programmes. When the reach of activity is extensive, the societal impact of the Faith becomes more evident. The Bahá'í community is afforded higher standing as a distinctive moral voice in the life of a people and is able to contribute an informed perspective to the discourses around it on, say, the development of the younger generations. Figures of authority from the wider society start to draw on the insight and experience arising from initiatives of social action inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. Conversations influenced by those teachings, concerned with the common weal, permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population, to the point where an effect on the general discourse in a locality can be perceived.

Beyond the Bahá'í community, people are coming to regard the Local Spiritual Assembly as a radiant source of wisdom to which they too can turn for illumination.

We recognize that developments like these are yet a distant prospect for many, even in clusters where the pattern of activity embraces large numbers. But in some places, this is the work of the moment. In such clusters, while the friends continue to be occupied with sustaining the process of growth, other dimensions of Bahá'í endeavour claim an increasing share of their attention. They are seeking to understand how a flourishing local population can transform the society of which it is an integral part. This will be a new frontier of learning for the foreseeable future, where insights will be generated that will ultimately benefit the whole Bahá'í world.

Releasing the potential of the youth

The marvellous exploits of the youth in the field of service are one of the finest fruits of the present Plan. If any proof were needed of the extraordinary potential that the youth possess, it has been incontrovertibly delivered. In the wake of the youth conferences convened in 2013, the surge of energy which was imparted to the work being carried out in clusters demonstrates clearly how the community of the Greatest Name is able to give shape to the highest aspirations of young people. How pleased we are to see that, following the participation of more than 80,000 youth in these conferences, an additional cohort of over 100,000 have joined them in taking part in numerous encounters held since then. Measures to encourage the full engagement of these growing contingents in the activities of the community must constitute a major component of the new Plan.

The enthusiastic participation of the youth also highlighted the fact that they represent a most responsive element of every receptive population to which the friends have sought to reach out. What has been learned in this regard is how to help young people become aware of the contribution they can make to the improvement of their society. As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way. Conversations along these lines kindle interest in how the physical and spiritual powers available to them at this time of life can be channelled towards providing for the needs of others, particularly for younger generations. Special gatherings for youth, now occurring more frequently at the level of the cluster and even the neighbourhood or village, have proved to be ideal occasions for bringing an intensity to this ongoing conversation, and they are an increasingly common feature of cycles of activity in many clusters.

Experience suggests that a discussion about contributing to the betterment of society fails to tap the deepest springs of motivation if it excludes exploration of spiritual themes. The importance of “doing”, of arising to serve and to accompany fellow souls, must be harmonized with the notion of “being”, of increasing one’s understanding of the divine teachings and mirroring forth spiritual qualities in one’s life. And so it is that, having been introduced to the vision of the Faith for humanity and the exalted character of its mission, the youth naturally feel a desire to be of service, a desire to which training institutes swiftly respond. Indeed, releasing the capacity of the youth is, for each training institute, a sacred charge. Yet fostering that capacity as it develops is a responsibility of every institution of the Cause. The readiness youth demonstrate to take initiative, whatever lines of action they choose, can obscure the fact that they need sustained support from institutions and agencies in the cluster beyond the early steps.

Youth also support each other in this regard, coming together in groups to engage in further study and discuss their service, to reinforce one another’s efforts and build resolve, looking to ever extend the circle of friendship more widely. The encouragement offered in this way by a network of peers provides young people with a much-needed alternative to those siren voices that beckon towards the snares of consumerism and compulsive distractions, as well as a counter to the calls to demonize others. It is against this backdrop of enervating materialism and splintering societies that the junior youth programme reveals its particular value at this time. It

offers the youth an ideal arena in which to assist those younger than themselves to withstand the corrosive forces that especially target them.

As youth advance along the path of service, their endeavours are integrated seamlessly into the activities of the cluster, and as a consequence, the entire community thrives as a cohesive whole. Reaching out to the families of young people is a natural way of strengthening community building. Institutions and agencies are being challenged to increase their own capacity in order to find ways of systematically realizing the potential of the youth. With a greater awareness of this age group's circumstances and dynamics, they are able to plan accordingly—for instance, providing opportunities for youth to study courses intensively, perhaps immediately upon the conclusion of a youth gathering. The infusion of energy from a vibrant band of youth allows the tempo of the work within the cluster to be accelerated.

While it is right to expect great things from those who have so much to give in the path of service, the friends must guard against adopting a narrow outlook on what development to maturity entails. Freedom of movement and availability of time enable many youth to serve in ways that are directly related to the needs of the community, but as they advance further into their twenties, their horizons broaden. Other dimensions of a coherent life, equally demanding and highly meritorious, begin to make stronger claims on their attention. For many, an immediate priority will be further education, academic or vocational, according to the possibilities before them, and new spaces for interaction with society open up. Moreover, young women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to “enter into wedlock” that they may “bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants” and to “engage in crafts and professions”. Having taken up an occupation, youth naturally try to contribute to their field, or even to advance it in light of the insights they gain from their continued study of the Revelation, and they strive to be examples of integrity and excellence in their work. Bahá'u'lláh extols those “that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds.” This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, “commingled with their mother's milk”, and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed centre of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus. We rely on you and your auxiliaries to ensure that the spiritual and material prospects of the youth are given due weight in the deliberations of families, communities, agencies, and institutions.

Enhancing institutional capacity

The demands of the present Plan—establishing thousands of new programmes of growth and fortifying existing ones—required from national and regional institutions, as well as yourselves, a feat of strength and coordination. Meeting them was made possible through a shared spirit of collaboration among the Plan's three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions. This spirit was the prerequisite for every important undertaking, including special initiatives to settle pioneers in selected countries and, of course, the organization of 114 youth conferences. A prevalent attitude of joyful service, flexibility, and detachment from personal preferences lent even routine administrative activities a sacred quality. The fresh demands of the coming Plan will, undoubtedly, test the capacity of Bahá'í institutions further still, but no matter what, they will surely preserve this unified spirit among all who work together.

As indicated earlier, the movement of clusters along a continuum depends on there being a commitment from the institutions to guide and support cluster agencies and provide resources as necessary. This work is a critical responsibility of Regional Bahá'í Councils and regional training institutes. The number of Councils in the world rose from 170 to 203 in the last five years,

reflecting the growing need and the rising capacity for work to be undertaken at this level, and in some countries where Councils are yet to be formed, specific steps were taken to build experience in anticipation of their emergence, such as the appointment of regional teams. In some regions that stretch across a large territory, Councils have made arrangements for nurturing the development of groups of adjoining clusters. Meanwhile, in smaller countries that do not require the establishment of Regional Councils, National Assemblies are increasingly giving thought to ways of helping clusters advance, in some instances by forming a working group charged with this task; you are encouraged to stimulate learning in this area, with the aim that, in due course, formal structures can be defined that would assume this responsibility in much the same way that Councils do in other countries. And, as is the case with Councils, we envisage that any such structure which emerges at the national level will benefit from interaction with the institution of the Counsellors.

To discharge their duties effectively, regional and national institutions will need to remain fully acquainted with developments at the grassroots and what is being learned in the clusters whose progress they oversee. Timely access to information about the movement of clusters and the work of the institute in their jurisdictions is required for institutions to support their agencies and take the many decisions that concern, for instance, the deployment of pioneers, the allocation of funds, the creation and promotion of Bahá'í literature, and the planning of institutional meetings; it allows them to accurately read the reality of their communities and act on the basis of clearly understood needs when marshalling the energies of the friends towards meeting the exigencies of the hour. At various intervals a National Assembly, in consultation with you, may find it advisable to formally adopt and disseminate certain aspects of the lessons that have been learned, especially in relation to organizational schemes at the cluster and regional levels. The need to stay well informed about the community's accumulating experience holds particular implications for National Assemblies in larger countries that have several Regional Councils, notably so when the Assembly has devolved to Councils the work of administering the institute. Here, new arrangements at the national level have sometimes been necessary to provide the Assembly with cogent analysis of what is being learned across all regions.

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.

Attaining a higher level of functioning is similarly a pressing concern of training institutes. The community's efforts to fortify programmes of growth in thousands of clusters and sustain their intensification will place heavy demands on these agencies. Their focus, of course, is the unfoldment of the three stages of the educational process they oversee and the strengthening of the process of learning associated with each, so that both the quality of the institute's activities and the capacity to extend them to ever-growing numbers are constantly rising. While it is important that institutes attend to day-to-day operational matters, the scale of what must be accomplished requires that they also become occupied with considerations of strategy. Training institute boards need to maintain an ongoing consultation with national or regional coordinators, as well as with Auxiliary Board members, about how an activity in a cluster gains strength, how it can be adequately resourced, what approaches prove effective in different settings, and how experience can be shared. We have in mind a systematic and concentrated effort by this collaborative group to gather and apply insights emerging from the grassroots regarding the promotion of children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Addressing other

dimensions of the institute's work—such as schemes of coordination at the cluster level, enhancing the capacity of coordinators, and the management of statistics and finances—will be essential too. In your work with training institutes, you will no doubt wish to arrange that they draw on the experience of other institutes in the same part of the world. Sites for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth programme also offer a rich source of insight for the institutes of nearby countries or regions.

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.

We direct these statements to you in recognition of the unique responsibility that you, your deputies, and their assistants shoulder in helping the friends to advance their understanding in numerous areas, not least, of course, with respect to the dynamics of growth. As we have previously indicated, in the institution of the Counsellors the Bahá'í community has a system through which the lessons learned in the remotest parts of the planet can benefit the worldwide process of learning in which every follower of Bahá'u'lláh can take part. As a progressively deeper understanding of the Five Year Plan emerges among the believers over time, insights that arise from applying the guidance are recognized, articulated, absorbed, and shared. In this regard, an immense debt of gratitude is owed by the community of the Greatest Name to the International Teaching Centre, which has done so much in recent years, and with such diligence, to lovingly nurture and energetically promulgate a mode of learning that has now become well established.

The essential elements of the coming Plan, like those that came before it, are straightforward. Nevertheless, a profound understanding of its various facets requires an appreciation of the sophisticated set of operations through which a cluster develops. We rely on your institution being so familiar with the relevant guidance that the friends in general, and institutions and their agencies in particular, can depend on you to illuminate their deliberations by calling attention to pertinent considerations. Clearly, however, the need to assist the friends in at least 5,000 clusters

where the pattern of action is being intensified will be a considerable challenge, one with implications for your own mode of functioning—but more especially for that of Auxiliary Board members. Clusters that are in the front ranks of the growth process in their areas will inevitably claim a large share of their time; also, administrative arrangements at the regional level will more frequently require their support. They are concerned with much of what occurs in the community; attentive both to the development of each stage of the educational process and to the strengthening of the cycles of activity, they promote coherence among the lines of action being advanced in a cluster and fan into flame a passion for teaching. In the exercise of their responsibility to foster learning and to help the friends enter the arena of service, they draw heavily on the training institute, aspects of whose work align closely with theirs. But their other duties are equally demanding. As such, they will need to consider how, in order to fulfil those wide-ranging responsibilities, they can draw on the help of their assistants more extensively and more creatively. Assistants, of course, may be assigned any task—simple or complex, general or highly specific—and this versatility constitutes a distinctive strength. While some assistants might be occupied with the development of a local community, others might be given tasks that relate to an entire cluster. By properly orienting them, guiding them as capacity expands, and gradually increasing their duties, Auxiliary Board members will be able to better exploit the possibilities that exist. Much is sure to be learned as a result, and you are encouraged to derive insights from the experience of your auxiliaries.

A period of special potency

The systematic pursuit of the Plan in all its dimensions gives rise to a pattern of collective endeavour distinguished not only for its commitment to service, but also for its attraction to worship. The intensification of activity which the next five years requires will further enrich the devotional life shared by those who serve side by side in clusters around the world. This process of enrichment is already much advanced: witness, for instance, how gatherings for worship have been integrated into the core of community life. Devotional meetings are occasions where any soul may enter, inhale the heavenly fragrances, experience the sweetness of prayer, meditate upon the Creative Word, be transported on the wings of the spirit, and commune with the one Beloved. Feelings of fellowship and common cause are generated, particularly in the spiritually heightened conversations that naturally occur at such times and through which the “city of the human heart” may be opened. By convening a gathering for worship at which adults and children of any background are welcome, the spirit of the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* is evoked in any locality. The enhancement of the devotional character of a community also has an effect on the Nineteen Day Feast and can be felt at other times when the friends come together.

Holy Day commemorations hold a special position in this regard. The Tablets recited, and the prayers, stories, songs, and sentiments voiced—all of them expressions of love for those sacred Figures Whose lives and missions are being remembered—stir the heart and fill the soul with awe and wonder. During the Five Year Plan about to commence, there will occur two momentous occasions of this kind: the two-hundred-year anniversaries of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh and of the Birth of the Báb in 2017 and 2019 respectively. These glorious Festivals will be opportunities for Bahá’ís in every land to attract the largest possible number of believers, their families, friends, and collaborators, as well as others from the wider society, to commemorate moments when a Being peerless in creation, a Manifestation of God, was born to the world. Celebrating these bicentenaries is sure to increase appreciation for how the observance of Holy Days, now according to a calendar that unites the friends of God everywhere, strengthens Bahá’í identity.

Over the coming years, the community will, in fact, encounter a series of anniversaries, concluding with the Centenary of the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in November 2021, which will close the first century of the Formative Age. Next year the Bahá’í world will mark one hundred years since the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan flowed from the pen of the Master. In these fourteen Tablets, revealed during one of humanity’s darkest hours, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laid out a charter for the teaching work that defined its theatre of action as the entire planet. Held in abeyance until

1937, when the first in a succession of Plans launched at the instigation of the Guardian was assigned to the Bahá'ís of North America, the Divine Plan has continued to unfold over the decades since as the collective capacity of Bahá'u'lláh's followers has grown, enabling them to take on ever-greater challenges. How wondrous the vision of the Plan's Author! Placing before the friends the prospect of a day when the light of His Father's Revelation would illuminate every corner of the world, He set out not only strategies for achieving this feat but guiding principles and unchanging spiritual requisites. Every effort made by the friends to systematically propagate the divine teachings traces its origins to the forces set in motion in the Divine Plan.

The coming global endeavour to which the friends will be summoned calls for the application of proven strategies, systematic action, informed analysis, and keen insight. Yet above all, it is a spiritual enterprise, and its true character should never be obscured. The urgency to act is impelled by the world's desperate condition. All that the followers of Bahá'u'lláh have learned in the last twenty years must culminate in the accomplishments of the next five. The scale of what is being asked of them brings to mind one of His Tablets in which He describes, in striking terms, the challenge entailed in spreading His Cause:

How many the lands that remained untilled and uncultivated; and how many the lands that were tilled and cultivated, and yet remained without water; and how many the lands which, when the harvest time arrived, no harvester came forth to reap! However, through the wonders of God's favour and the revelations of His loving-kindness, We cherish the hope that souls may appear who are the embodiments of heavenly virtue and who will occupy themselves with teaching the Cause of God and training all that dwell on earth.

The systematic efforts of His loved ones throughout the world aim at the fulfilment of the hope thus expressed by the Blessed Perfection. May He Himself reinforce them at every turn.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]