THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

30 December 2021

To the Conference of the
Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

At Riḍván this year we described how, over the course of a quarter century, the Bahá'í world underwent a transformation that endowed it with an undreamed-of capacity to learn, to grow, and to serve humanity. But, however bright were the achievements of this period, they must be eclipsed by what is to come. By the conclusion of the new series of Plans recently begun, the Bahá'í community will need to have acquired capacities that can scarcely be glimpsed at present. In your deliberations over the coming days, you will be occupied with exploring what is required to bring into being such a fortified community.

Bahá'u'lláh states that "the purpose for which mortal men have, from utter nothingness, stepped into the realm of being, is that they may work for the betterment of the world and live together in concord and harmony." He has revealed teachings that make this possible. Building a society that consciously pursues this collective purpose is the work of not only this generation, but of many generations to come, and Bahá'u'lláh's followers welcome all who labour alongside them in this undertaking. It means learning how to raise up vibrant, outward-looking communities; it means those communities learning how to bring about spiritual and material progress; it means learning how to contribute to the discourses that influence the direction of that progress. These areas of endeavour are, naturally, familiar ones. Seen from one perspective, they are quite distinct, each having its own characteristics and imperatives. Yet they all represent ways of awakening the energies latent in the human soul and channelling them towards the betterment of society. Together, they are means of releasing what the Guardian described as "the society-building power" of the Faith. This inherent power possessed by the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is visible even in the fledgling efforts of a Bahá'í community learning to serve humanity and promote the Word of God. And though the world society foreshadowed in His Revelation is of course far distant, communities that are earnestly learning to apply His teachings to their social reality abound. How immensely blessed are those souls who, alive to the greatness of this Day and the significance of their actions, strive for the emergence of a society shaped by the divine teachings.

The series of global Plans that began at Riḍván will last a full twenty-five years. It will carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Riḍván 2046. During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, "the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity"; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigour and spiritual health.

The enkindled souls being raised up through the processes of the Plan are seeking to gain an ever more profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings—"the sovereign remedy for every disease"—and to apply them to the needs of their society. They are committed to the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of individuals rests in the welfare of society at large. They are

loyal citizens who eschew partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, they are focused on transcending differences, harmonizing perspectives, and promoting the use of consultation for making decisions. They emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order. They champion rationality and science as essential for human progress. They advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in their minds, they view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and they strive to foster fellow feeling even among groups who may traditionally have been hostile to one another. They are conscious of how the forces of materialism are at work around them, and their eyes are wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world, yet they are equally clear sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism. They see the power that true religion possesses to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, they labour to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. They share their beliefs liberally with others, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and they never impose their own standards on anyone. And while they would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, they are clear about what they have learned and what they still need to learn. Their efforts advance to the alternating rhythm of action and reflection; setbacks leave them unfazed. In places where growing numbers are helping to build communities of this character, the power of the Cause to transform people's social existence, as well as their inner lives, is becoming increasingly visible. Earnest pursuit of the Plan's central aim will, we are sure, cause many, many such communities to emerge.

The movement of clusters

A greater expression of the society-building power of the Faith requires, first and foremost, still further advances in the process of entry by troops in every part of the world. The essentially spiritual undertakings of diffusing the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation ever more widely and extending the roots of His Faith ever more deeply into the soil of society have measurable outcomes: the number of clusters where a programme of growth has been initiated and the degree of intensity that each has reached. The means now exist for a swift advance in relation to both measures. The goal that the community of the Greatest Name must aspire to fulfil during the current series of global Plans is to establish intensive programmes of growth in all the clusters in the world. This formidable objective implies a broadening and intensification of activity on a scale never witnessed. Rapid progress towards this goal must be achieved in the course of the Nine Year Plan.

As a preliminary step, we ask that you assist National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils to determine whether their schemes for dividing their territories into clusters would benefit from any adjustments. As you know, a cluster defines an area where the activities of the Plan can be stimulated in a manageable and sustainable way. Over the last twenty-one years, much has been learned about the size of cluster that is "manageable" in different contexts and in different parts of the world; in some countries, modifications have already begun to be considered, occasioned by the effects of growth. In many instances this reassessment will not lead to any change, but in some it will result in a cluster being divided or reduced in size, and occasionally a cluster might become larger. Areas that are sparsely populated owing to the natural terrain may be excluded from the clustering scheme. Of course, any believers who reside in such places would adopt as many elements of the framework for action as are applicable to their circumstances.

The movement of clusters along a continuum of development will remain the basic model for the expansion and consolidation of the community. The features of the developmental path that should be followed, and in particular the first, second, and third milestones that mark progress along the way, are already well known to the friends from our previous messages and from their own experience, and we feel no need to reiterate what we have stated before. By the close of the

One Year Plan we anticipate that programmes of growth will be under way in over 6,000 clusters, that in close to 5,000 of these the second milestone will have been passed, and that in 1,300 of these the believers will have advanced further. These figures must climb considerably over the coming nine years. Once any adjustments to the clustering scheme in each country have been determined, we ask that you work with National Assemblies and Regional Councils to forecast the numbers of clusters where progress could be made past the first, second, and third milestones, respectively, during the Plan. It should be borne in mind that these are only intended to be well-informed estimates; they can be refined later as necessary and need not be laboured over at length. As such, we request that the results of these assessments be sent to the Bahá'í World Centre by Naw-Rúz. At Riḍván, we will then be able to set out the total collective aspirations of the Bahá'í world for the Nine Year Plan.

We are conscious that there are some regions and countries where the Faith remains at an early point of development, and there is a pressing need to ensure that what the Bahá'í world has learned about accelerating the growth process benefits these places as well. One important lesson that has become clear is the immense value, to a region, of a cluster where the third milestone has been passed. Once the friends in a given cluster have developed the range of capacities that such progress implies, and the means to disseminate insights and share experience about community-building endeavours are in place, then a swift acceleration of the work of expansion and consolidation in surrounding clusters becomes possible. With this in mind, it is imperative that during the Nine Year Plan the process of growth reach this level of intensity in at least one cluster in every country and every region. This constitutes one of the Plan's chief objectives and it will call for the concentrated effort of many a consecrated soul. The International Teaching Centre is ready to work with you to implement several strategies to bring this about. Foremost among these will be the deployment of teams of international and homefront pioneers who are familiar with the framework for action and are prepared to dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to serving the Cause over a number of years. You will need to impress upon National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils the urgency of encouraging believers who, following in the footsteps of so many heroic souls of the past, can arise to ensure that the light of the Faith shines bright in every territory. We look in particular to countries, regions, and clusters where strength and experience have accumulated to generate a flow of pioneers to places where help is needed, and also to provide support by other means. This flow of support is one more way in which the spirit of collaboration and mutual assistance, so essential for progress, manifests itself in systematic action.

The accomplishments of the previous series of Plans—particularly the last Five Year Plan—could not have occurred without a tremendous advance in the teaching work. An important dimension of this work is the capacity to engage in conversations on spiritual themes, a capacity which was explored in our message to your 2015 conference, where we described how it is developed through participation in institute courses and by gaining practical experience. It is evident that the pattern of activity unfolding at the grassroots opens up a variety of settings in which receptive souls—sometimes whole families or peer groups—can take part in meaningful conversations which awaken interest in the vision of the Faith and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Over time, many such souls begin to identify themselves with the Bahá'í community, especially as they gain the confidence to participate in community life through service. Of course, the community welcomes any degree of association that a person would like to maintain, great or small. Yet to recognize Bahá'u'lláh as a Manifestation of God and accept the privileges and responsibilities that are uniquely associated with membership in the Bahá'í community is a singular moment in a person's spiritual development, quite distinct from regular involvement in Bahá'í activities or voicing support for Bahá'í principles. Experience has shown that the environment created by community-building endeavours in a locality enables anyone who wishes to take this step to do so with relative ease. Wherever these endeavours are under way, it is important for the friends to remain mindful that the doors of the Faith are wide open and to give encouragement to those who stand at the threshold. And in areas where such endeavours have been well established for some

time, many believers are discovering that a vibrant, expanding pattern of activity can naturally lead to families, groups of friends, and even clusters of households being ready to enter the Cause. For in spaces where the possibility of joining the community can be discussed openly and inclusively among those who share a sense of collective identity, souls can more easily feel emboldened to take this step together. Bahá'í institutions, especially Local Spiritual Assemblies, must adopt a mindset that allows for such developments, and ensure that any obstacles are removed.

We ask you and your auxiliaries to help the believers, wherever they reside, reflect periodically on effective ways of teaching the Faith in their surroundings, and to fan within their hearts a passion for teaching that will attract the confirmations of the Divine Kingdom. Souls who have been given the blessing of faith have a natural wish to share this gift through conversations with relatives, friends, classmates, co-workers, and those previously unmet, seeking in every place and at every moment a hearing ear. Different settings and circumstances lend themselves to different approaches, and the friends should be occupied in an ongoing process of learning about what is most effective in the place where they are.

Learning from the most advanced clusters

Six years ago we described for you the characteristics of a cluster where the friends have passed the third milestone along the continuum of growth. To have come this far implies intense activity occurring in specific neighbourhoods or villages, but also concerted effort being made by the generality of the believers living across the cluster—in other words, a rising spirit of universal participation in the work of community building. In practice, this means the mobilization of a sizeable number of Bahá'ís who are creatively and intelligently applying the Plan's framework for action to the reality of their own circumstances wherever in the cluster they live. It entails families and individual believers working together and making a conscious decision to see themselves as belonging to an expanding nucleus. Such groups of friends set about widening the circle of participation in their activities by engaging with the networks to which they belong—networks created through a place of work or study, a local school, or a community hub of another kind—and by accompanying others who arise to serve alongside them. These efforts have tremendous merit. Even when a cluster contains a number of flourishing centres of intense activity, efforts being made across the rest of the cluster might still represent a large proportion of all the activity that is occurring. We also acknowledge, in this connection, the steps being taken in some clusters to systematically reach out to a specific population that has shown receptivity to the Faith but is dispersed throughout the cluster. This can be seen as a specialized form of the community-building work, and one which continues to show great promise. As participation in the work of the Plan in all its forms increases, many opportunities emerge for the friends to learn from each other's experience and to kindle within one another the joy of teaching.

Of course, the work undertaken in receptive neighbourhoods and villages has been a special focus of attention in recent years. As the inhabitants of such locations begin to participate in Bahá'í activities in large numbers, more consideration needs to be given to coordination in order to cope with the inherent complexity involved. Within each centre of intense activity, collaborative arrangements emerge among groups of families, who organize community-building activities among themselves with a view to widening the embrace of such activities to many nearby households; an informal network of friends provides encouragement and support to the endeavours under way. The character of daily life in such places is adapting to the rise of a culture in which worship and service are cherished activities involving many people at once. Uplifting, well-prepared community gatherings—extending in some cases to camps and festivals—occur with increasing frequency, and music and song feature prominently on such occasions. Indeed the arts as a whole, so integral a part of the development of a community from the start, stand out in such settings as an important means of generating joy, strengthening bonds of unity, disseminating knowledge, and consolidating understanding, as well as of acquainting those in the wider society

with the principles of the Cause. And naturally, there remains a strong focus on being outward looking: finding ways to continually share the fruits of a thriving pattern of action with souls who are as yet unfamiliar with the Faith.

Amid all this, we have observed a specific, heartening phenomenon, whose early glimpses we described in our message to your 2015 conference as representing a new frontier. Although learning how to embrace large numbers is a characteristic of any cluster where the third milestone has been passed, the focus of the friends necessarily begins to broaden as they approach a point where a significant proportion of the population of a particular area is taking part in community-building activities. This might be true for only a specific residential area in a cluster, or for several such areas, or for a single village; other parts of the cluster might not yet share the same reality. But in such locations, the thoughts of the friends labouring at the grassroots are increasingly occupied with the progress and well-being of everyone dwelling in the vicinity. Bahá'í institutions feel more keenly their responsibility for the spiritual education of an entire generation of children and junior youth, most or even all of whom might already be engaged in community activities. Local Spiritual Assemblies strengthen their relationships with authorities and local leaders, even entering into formal collaborations, and growing attention is given to the multiplying initiatives of social action arising from groups of junior youth, youth, women, families, or others who are responding to the needs around them. The sheer level and variety of activity requires Auxiliary Board members to appoint multiple assistants to serve a single village or neighbourhood; each assistant might follow one or more lines of action, offering counsel and support as necessary, and lending momentum to the processes in motion.

In places where the activities of the Plan have reached such a degree of prevalence, the inhabitants now possess a substantially increased capacity to steer the course of their own development, and the institutions and agencies of the Faith there now have an expanded vision of their responsibilities. Of course, these responsibilities still include having robust systems in place to continually build capacity and support those taking initiative. But the advancement of the community depends, to a greater extent than before, on local institutions and agencies being conscious of the social forces at work in the environment and acting to preserve the integrity of the community's many endeavours. Meanwhile, the relationship of the Bahá'í community to the surrounding society undergoes profound change. As represented by its formal structures of administration and informal collaborative arrangements, the Bahá'í community has become a highly visible protagonist in society in its own right, one that is ready to shoulder important responsibilities and intensify a broad, collective process of learning about spiritual and material progress. At the same time, as the wider society embraces many aspects of Bahá'í community life and imbibes its unifying spirit, the dynamics thus created allow divers groups to come together in a combined movement inspired by Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the oneness of humanity. To date, the number of places where a Bahá'í pattern of community life has attained such prevalence is modest, yet it is growing. Here is witnessed a release of the society-building power of the Faith unlike anything that has been seen before.

Naturally, prevalence of Bahá'í activity on this scale is not a prospect everywhere. It is necessary to appreciate the difference that is made by the conditions in a cluster or in parts of a cluster and by the characteristics of a people—that is, by the reality of circumstances. Accordingly, the ways in which the society-building power of the Faith will find expression in different settings will vary. But regardless of the extent to which Bahá'í community life embraces those who reside in a particular area—regardless, even, of the intensity of a programme of growth in a cluster or the level of activity in a neighbourhood or village—the challenge facing the friends serving at the grassroots is essentially the same in every place. They must be able to read their own reality and ask: what, in light of the possibilities and requirements at hand, would be fitting objectives to pursue in the coming cycle or series of cycles? You and your auxiliaries are ideally placed to put this question and to ensure that appropriate strategies are identified. Much can be learned from the experience of the friends in similar clusters, for a community that is a step further along the

same path can provide valuable insights about the goal to strive for next. As the friends ponder what is before them, they will readily see that for every community there is a goal in reach, and for every goal a path to reach it. Looking ahead on this path, might we not perceive Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the reins of humanity's affairs in one hand, His other beckoning all to hasten, hasten?

Contributing to social transformation

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is concerned with the transformation of both humanity's inner life and social environment. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi describes how the social environment provides the "atmosphere" in which souls can "grow spiritually and reflect in full the light of God" shining through the Revelation. A clear sign that the society-building power of the Cause is being released in a cluster is that efforts are being made by a growing band of its inhabitants, inspired by the teachings of the Faith, to help improve the spiritual character and social conditions of the wider community to which they belong. The contribution made by Bahá'ís is distinguished by its focus on building capacity for service; it is an approach founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development.

As the intensity of community-building work in a cluster increases, the friends there inevitably become more conscious of social, economic, or cultural barriers that are impeding people's spiritual and material progress. Children and junior youth lacking support in their education, pressures on girls resulting from traditional customs related to early marriage, families needing help with navigating unfamiliar systems of healthcare, a village struggling for want of some basic necessity, or long-standing prejudices arising from a legacy of hostility between different groups—when a Bahá'í community's efforts in the field of expansion and consolidation bring it into contact with these situations and many others, it will be drawn to respond to such realities as its circumstances permit. In reflecting on such situations it becomes evident that, within clusters, expansion and consolidation, social action, and contributing to prevalent discourses are dimensions of a single, unified, outward-looking endeavour carried out at the grassroots of society. All these efforts are pursued according to a common framework for action, and this above all else brings coherence to the overall pattern of activity.

The initial stirrings of grassroots social action begin to be seen in a cluster as the availability of human resources increases and capacity for a wider range of tasks develops. Villages have proven to be notably fertile ground from which social action initiatives have emerged and been sustained, but in urban settings too, friends living there have succeeded in carrying out activities and projects suited to the social environment, at times by working with local schools, agencies of civil society, or even government bodies. Social action is being undertaken in a number of important fields, including the environment, agriculture, health, the arts, and particularly education. Over the course of the Nine Year Plan, and especially as the study of specific institute courses stimulates greater activity in this area, we expect to see a proliferation of formal and informal efforts to promote the social and economic development of a people. Some of these community-based initiatives will require basic administrative structures to sustain their work. Where conditions are propitious, Local Spiritual Assemblies will need to be encouraged to learn how best to cultivate new, fledgling initiatives and to foster efforts that show promise. In some cases, the needs associated with a particular field of endeavour will warrant the establishment of a Bahá'í-inspired organization, and we anticipate the appearance of more such organizations during the coming Plan. For their part, National Spiritual Assemblies will have to find ways in which they can stay well informed about what is being learned at the grassroots of their communities and analyse the experience being gained; in some places this will call for the creation of an entity dedicated to following social action. Looking across the Bahá'í world, we are delighted to see how much momentum has already been generated in this area of endeavour through the encouragement and support of the Bahá'í International Development Organization.

Closely connected with the capacity for engaging in social action is a capacity for contributing to the discourses of society. At heart, this is simply a capacity for participating in a conversation

about a matter that affects people's lives and offering a perspective grounded in Bahá'í principles and Bahá'í experience. Viewed in this way, it is a skill which many Bahá'ís have the opportunity to practise almost daily, for instance in their studies or occupations, and which is cultivated through involvement in institute courses; in its more formal expression, it is central to the work of the Bahá'í International Community and national Offices of External Affairs. However, in relation to the release of the society-building power of the Faith at the grassroots, it is a capacity that comes into greater demand as closer association with a population, brought about through the work of expansion and consolidation, leads to increased consciousness of an area's prevailing social problems, as well as of the aspirations of its people to overcome them. As the number of those participating in community-building activities rises, so does the need for the Bahá'í community to offer, as a unified body, its considered perspective on obstacles to social progress and on issues that weigh on the minds and spirits of those with whom it interacts. This has particular implications for Local Spiritual Assemblies. In places where the activities of the Plan have attained a degree of prevalence, the Assembly begins to be viewed more widely as a source of moral insight. Over time, efforts to contribute to societal discourses become more systematic, and Bahá'ís become adept at helping those around them to engage constructively in a discourse and find consensus. Opportunities are sought out to share the perspectives of the Faith with community leaders and figures in authority, and spaces are created in which representatives of various groups and interests can be assisted to reach a common point of view through consultation. We are pleased with the steps that have already been taken to learn how insights from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and from the experience of Bahá'í communities can be brought to bear upon pressing social issues at the local level; much more is sure to be learned in this regard during the Nine Year Plan.

We wish to stress that, historically and now, social action and efforts to participate in the prevalent discourses of society have emerged not only in the context of growth, but also as a result of individual Bahá'ís striving to contribute to society's progress in ways available to them. As a personal response to Bahá'u'lláh's summons to work for the betterment of the world, believers have variously chosen to adopt certain vocations and have sought out opportunities to support the activities of like-minded groups and organizations. Projects, both large and small, have been started in order to respond to a range of social issues. Numerous Bahá'í-inspired organizations have been established by groups of individuals to work for many different objectives, and specialist entities have been founded to give attention to a particular discourse. All of these efforts, at whatever scale they have been undertaken, have benefited from being able to draw on the principles and insights guiding the activities occurring at the grassroots of the worldwide Bahá'í community, and they have also benefited from the wise counsels of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies. We rejoice to see these diverse, harmonious expressions of faith by the devoted followers of the Blessed Beauty, in response to the tribulations of a perplexed and sorely agitated world.

Educational endeavours and the training institute

The importance of education to a Bahá'í conception of spiritual and social transformation can hardly be overestimated. "Consider", Bahá'u'lláh states, "the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings dependeth upon it." The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Pre-eminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional training institutes operating with such proficiency around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans. Building capacity for service within communities by enabling ever-increasing numbers of individuals to benefit from the institute process will continue to be a central feature of the Plans in the present series. The capacity for community development that has already emerged,

represented by hundreds of thousands of individuals who are able to serve as tutors, animators, or children's class teachers, is a resource of historic consequence.

When we first introduced the concept of the training institute, it was in the context of the need to raise up human resources to take on the tasks of expansion and consolidation. At this juncture, when a new series of Plans has just begun, we invite you to take a more expansive view. Increasingly, participation in institute courses is preparing the friends of God for an ever-deeper engagement in the life of the wider community; it is endowing them with the knowledge, insights, and skills that enable them to contribute not only to the process of developing their own community, but to the progress of society. In short, the institute is a potent means for the society-building power of the Faith to find release. Although the task of developing curricular materials to support this purpose is a long-term undertaking, existing materials already aim to build capacity for a broad range of initiatives. Moreover, they offer a seamless coherent educational experience from the age of five, upwards to the age of junior youth, and through into adulthood, and they serve as a direct counterpart to the pattern of activities unfolding at the grassroots. In relation to this, we have been pleased to see the rich insights that the friends in different parts of the world, in a variety of social and cultural contexts, are generating about aspects of community development. If these insights, and those still to emerge, are to benefit Bahá'í communities more widely, systems for the preparation and refinement of educational materials will need to be extended. With this in mind, we will soon set out the approach that will guide this work over the coming years.

With respect to raising the capacity of institutes to deliver each of the three stages of the educational process, we are glad to see that attention is increasingly being given to enhancing the quality of the educational experience itself, in addition to expanding the system for its delivery. A critical requirement is to enable all those contributing to the work of the institute to progressively advance their understanding of the educational content: its objectives, its structure, its pedagogical principles, its methodology, its central concepts, its interconnections. Many training institute boards have been supported in this regard by the collaborative groups described in our message to your 2015 conference. In places, separate teams have also begun to focus respectively on children's classes, junior youth groups, and study circles, identifying factors that contribute to their effectiveness and finding ways to assist the friends involved in each avenue of service to further raise their own capacity. The Auxiliary Board members in a region and their assistants are often the first to see to it that what is being learned reaches a wider number of friends across adjoining clusters and within centres of intense activity. Individuals with a depth of experience in the promotion of institute activities are serving as resource persons, and they have proved instrumental in helping institutes at an earlier point of development to advance. Nevertheless, in general it is Counsellors who are ensuring that each institute becomes familiar with the many essential insights being generated by their sister agencies in neighbouring countries and regions. Counsellors have arranged for institutes to be organized into groupings of varying sizes to enable the lessons that are being learned by the most experienced institutes to be shared more widely, increasingly through the means of formal seminars. All these arrangements will need to be strengthened during the next Plan. In places where a site for the dissemination of learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme is operating, collaboration between the learning site and associated institutes has already proved extremely fruitful, and it should intensify; their pursuit of a common goal and their shared desire to see clusters advance create ideal conditions for the spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance to flourish. The knowledge that has now accumulated about factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the institute process is extensive, and we look to the International Teaching Centre to organize what has been learned and make it available to you.

What we have described above is an educational system in a state of constant refinement. This requires many individuals to lend their support to its further development; it also requires institutes, and Bahá'í institutions more generally, to plan ahead and ensure that individuals who

have developed considerable capacity in supporting the community's educational endeavours are able to sustain their service and can, when their life circumstances change, continue to be involved in the work of the institute in other meaningful ways. Appreciating the effectiveness of the institute process, every follower of Bahá'u'lláh will feel a desire to contribute to its advancement in some way—not least, the Bahá'í youth. Institutes know well that releasing the potential possessed by young people is, for them, a sacred charge; we now ask that Bahá'í youth view the future development of the institute in the very same light. At the vanguard of a nine-year, community-wide endeavour to bring the institute to a higher level of functioning, we expect to see a broad movement of youth setting the standard. They should seize every opportunity—in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction—to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute's programmes. Some youth will be able to devote a period of service—perhaps even successive years—to the provision of education, especially to those younger than themselves; for many, support for the institute's activities will be an ever-present dimension of their lives throughout their own education and as they seek a livelihood from their calling in this world; but for none should it be anything less than a cherished commitment.

In many parts of the world, a natural outcome of the participation of individuals and families in the institute process has been an increased consciousness of the importance of education in all its forms. Friends serving as children's class teachers take a keen interest in the broad educational development of those they teach, while friends serving as tutors and animators are naturally concerned with the extent to which those approaching or entering adulthood—girls and boys alike—can access and benefit from education of many kinds, not limited to the courses offered by the institute itself. For instance, they can encourage young people to look towards apprenticeships or university studies. We have been struck by how, in many communities, engagement in the institute process by large numbers has gradually reshaped this aspect of culture within a population. The institutions of the Faith will need to take responsibility for ensuring that, as consciousness is raised in this way, the noble aspirations that arise in young people as a result—aspirations to acquire the education and training that will allow them to offer a lifetime of meaningful service to their society—can be fulfilled. The long-term development of a community and, ultimately, of a nation, from generation to generation, depends to a large degree on the effort made to invest in those who will assume responsibility for collective social progress.

This exploration of the centrality of education to a community founded on Bahá'í principles would be incomplete without a further observation. Shoghi Effendi has laid great stress on the importance of striving, through "constant endeavour", to obtain "a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation". The training institute has no parallel as an instrument for the systematic exposure of limitless numbers of souls to the life-giving waters of the Revelation and the inexhaustible meaning of the Word of God. But the friends' efforts to increase their understanding of the Faith and its teachings are of course not limited to participation in the institute process. Indeed, one strong indicator of an institute's effectiveness is the thirst it cultivates within those who engage with its materials to continue to study the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh—individually, but also collectively, whether in formal spaces created by the institutions or in more informal settings. Beyond the study of the Revelation itself, the implications that the teachings hold for countless fields of human endeavour are of great importance. A notable example of one form of education through which young believers are becoming better acquainted with a Bahá'í perspective on issues relevant to the progress of humanity is participation in the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity. Given the vastness of the ocean of the Revelation, it will be apparent that exploring its depths is a lifelong occupation of every soul who would tread the path of service.

As the contribution being made by the Faith to the progress of society in different parts of the world gains greater visibility, the Bahá'í community will increasingly be called upon to explicate the principles it advocates, and to demonstrate their applicability to the issues facing humanity.

The more the intellectual life of a community blossoms and thrives, the greater its capacity to answer this call. It will be up to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh to provide, in the world of ideas, the intellectual rigour and clarity of thought to match their commitment to spiritual and material progress in the world of deeds.

Raising capacity for administration at all levels

Eighty years ago, a letter written on behalf of the Guardian described Bahá'í administration as "the first shaping of what in future will come to be the social life and laws of community living". Today, at the beginning of the second century of the Formative Age, the shape of Bahá'í administration has developed considerably, and its continued development will be essential for the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

The administration of the Faith at the grassroots is, of course, intimately connected with the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies. These nascent Houses of Justice are described by Shoghi Effendi as "the chief sinews of Bahá'í society, as well as the ultimate foundation of its administrative structure", and he greatly emphasizes the importance of their formation. In 1995, we called for the reinstitution of the practice that required all Local Assemblies, including those being newly formed, to be elected on the First Day of Riḍván rather than at any other time of year. This development was related to the fact that, while believers from outside a locality could assist with the electoral process, the primary responsibility for electing any Assembly and maintaining its operations rests with the Bahá'ís of that place; much depends on their readiness for undertaking administrative activity. It has been seen, in recent years, how a sense of Bahá'í identity can gradually gain strength in an area as a pattern of action grounded in the teachings becomes established among individuals and families living there. Thus, a community will often have attained a certain level of capacity in relation to community-building endeavours by the time the formation of a Local Assembly becomes possible. As this point approaches—and it should not be unduly delayed—efforts have to be made to cultivate an appreciation for the formal aspects of community life associated with Bahá'í administration. The Local Assembly that emerges in such a milieu is likely to be well aware of its responsibility to encourage and strengthen those activities which help to sustain a vibrant community. However, it will also need to gain proficiency in discharging a wide range of other responsibilities, and the support provided to it by your auxiliaries and their assistants will be vitally important. In our message to your 2010 conference, we described the developmental path of such an Assembly, and we referred to various dimensions of its functioning that would need to receive attention, including its ability to manage and develop a Local Fund and, in time, to support initiatives of social action and to interact with agencies of local government and civil society. The benefits that accrue to a community being served by such an Assembly need no elaboration.

In your interactions with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Bahá'í Councils, we ask that you devote attention to the matter of establishing Local Spiritual Assemblies and consolidating their operations, especially in areas where this aspect of growth may have received less emphasis. We anticipate this will contribute to a rapid rise in the number of Local Assemblies formed year on year. In some countries, your consultations will need to include consideration of whether in rural areas existing arrangements for defining the boundaries of each locality are adequate.

One compelling insight which has emerged is that the extent to which the station and leadership of a Local Assembly is recognized in a community is related to how deeply the believers appreciate the sacredness of the electoral process and their duty to participate in it, in an atmosphere wholly free from the taint of suasion or worldly attitudes about power. As consciousness is raised in a community about the spiritual principles underlying Bahá'í elections, a new conception is formed of what it means for someone to be called to serve on an institution, and understanding grows of how the individual, the community, and the Local Assembly and its agencies relate to one another. Where systematic effort has been made to stimulate conversations

in a community about the formation of the Local Assembly and its purpose, and to sustain those conversations year after year, the strength of the elected body and the dynamism of community life reinforce each other.

This reciprocal effect has been especially noticeable over the last two years in places where we have approved the adoption of a two-stage electoral process for a Local Spiritual Assembly, an approach which traces its origins to instructions given by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá to the Spiritual Assembly of Ṭihrán. Twenty-two Local Assemblies, spread over eight countries, have already begun to be elected by this method during this period. Similar in many respects to the election of a National Spiritual Assembly, it involves the division of a locality into units from each of which one or more delegates are elected, after which the delegates elect the members of the Local Assembly. As the number of Bahá'ís residing in a locality grows large and the community's capacity for managing complexity increases, the case for implementing a two-stage electoral process becomes commensurately stronger. Accordingly, in the coming Plan, we expect to authorize the adoption of this method for electing a Local Assembly in many more places, both urban and rural, where conditions make such a step timely.

A Local Spiritual Assembly maintains a keen interest in learning how best to advance the community-building work within its jurisdiction, and as such it consults regularly with friends involved in coordinating endeavours in the cluster. It follows closely the development of any centres of intense activity in the locality, especially by offering support to the teams of believers who have emerged there and are stimulating the process of growth. In general, the more the intensification of activity requires organizational arrangements at the level of the locality or in parts of the locality—say, arranging campaigns of home visits, accompanying families who are holding devotional meetings, or encouraging them to form groups to work together—the more prominent the role that can be assumed by the Local Assembly in this regard. In localities where large numbers are being welcomed into the embrace of Bahá'í activities, and where the complexity of an Assembly's work and manifold responsibilities is increasing, the Assembly sometimes finds that its Secretary needs to be supported by a staffed office, and eventually, the need for a befitting local Ḥaẓíratu'l-Quds becomes more pressing.

As Local Assemblies begin to take on a greater and greater share of responsibility for nurturing the development of the community, institutions at the regional and national levels must become more systematic in their efforts to support them. We have been pleased to see this need being addressed in methodical ways, for instance by National Assemblies or Regional Councils convening periodic meetings with the Secretaries and other officers of Local Assemblies to consult about the unfoldment of specific lines of action.

Where a Regional Council has developed an enhanced capacity for administration, including an ability to provide appropriate kinds of support to many clusters at once, this has been conducive to the accelerated progress of the whole region. Our message to your 2015 conference indicated that in smaller countries where the establishment of Regional Councils is not required, a formal structure would need to emerge at the national level which would be charged with helping clusters to advance. We ask that, in countries where this has not yet occurred, you now consult with National Assemblies about the steps that can be taken to appoint that formal structure, namely, a National Growth Committee with three, five, or seven members. The National Assembly will need to give this agency the necessary latitude to foster the movement of clusters, drawing relevant insights from what has been learned about Regional Councils in this regard. Its responsibilities can include appointing Area Teaching Committees and encouraging them in their plans, arranging for the deployment of homefront pioneers, supporting teaching projects, and distributing core literature. The Committee will benefit from being able to collaborate closely with the training institute, itself an agency of the National Assembly, and with the Auxiliary Board members serving the country, and it will also be able to communicate directly with the relevant Counsellor. While a National Assembly will naturally wish to maintain an ongoing familiarity

with the work of the Committee and provide it with guidance, support, and encouragement, creating an entity that is wholly occupied with promoting growth should enable an Assembly to give greater attention to other important matters. In countries where Councils have not been formed but could be established eventually, a National Growth Committee should also be appointed at this time.

As the spiritual energies released by earnest pursuit of the Plan surge, they meet resistance from the countervailing forces that hold humanity back from attaining full maturity. In the face of such forces, the vitality of the various lines of action being followed at the local level needs to be preserved and fortified. This critical responsibility is of special relevance to the members of the two Auxiliary Boards, whose numerous, demanding duties keep them closely connected to conditions at the grassroots and alert to anything that might affect the spirit of a community. Across different cultures and social environments, they must assist the friends to face different kinds of challenges: to help previously antagonistic groups find unity through pursuit of a common goal; to learn to put aside inherited customs and attitudes that belong to humanity's period of adolescence, and to overcome prejudices of all kinds; to guard against any tendency to view matters with cynicism or an eye for faults, and instead sustain an eager and constructive outlook; to put the equality of women and men into practice; to cast off inertia and apathy through the exercise of individual initiative; to put one's support of plans for collective action before feelings of personal preference; to harness the power of modern technologies without succumbing to their potentially enervating effects; to prize the sweetness of teaching the Faith and the joy of serving humankind above worldly interests; to reject the opiate of consumerism; to turn away from materialist ideologies and the worldviews they aggressively promote, and fix one's gaze upon the bright beacon that is the laws and principles of God. These, and many more besides, constitute a formidable set of responsibilities for the company of the faithful to fulfil as they navigate what are sure to be tumultuous years in the life of humanity. Your auxiliaries, who have so creditably acquitted themselves in advancing the process of entry by troops, must be equal to all such challenges whenever and wherever they arise. Through the power of their good example and the clarity of their good counsel, may they help the friends to grow in faith, assurance, and commitment to a life of service, and accompany them as they build communities that are havens of peace, places where a harried and conflict-scarred humanity may find shelter.

Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society-building power of the Faith shine forth.

A historic mission

We hope to have impressed upon you, in these pages, that the present-day capacity of the Bahá'í community, combined with the discipline it has achieved through adherence to a coherent framework for action, has prepared it for an extensive, rigorous test of all its resources, spiritual as well as material. The Plan that will shortly commence—the first major undertaking in a sacred twenty-five-year venture, generational in its scope and significance—will make demands of the individual believer, the community, and the institutions reminiscent of the demands that the Guardian made of the Bahá'í world at the outset of the Ten Year Crusade. If, by the grace of Almighty God, the friends should succeed in reaching the heights of heroism to which they are now summoned, history will assuredly pay tribute to their actions in terms no less glowing than

those with which it honours the glorious deeds that decorate the annals of the first century of the Formative Age.

We put great reliance on you and on National Spiritual Assemblies to ensure that, in all the efforts made to acquaint the friends with the nature of this collective enterprise, the perspective of history is kept fully in view. The civilization of today, for all its material prowess, has been found wanting, and the verdict has been issued by the Supreme Pen: "Know ye not that We have rolled up that which the people possessed, and have unfolded a new order in its place?" The establishment of Divine Civilization is, in the words of the Guardian, "the primary mission of the Bahá'í Faith". It is to be built upon the most foundational qualities, ones for which the world stands in great need: unity, trustworthiness, mutual support, collaboration, fellow feeling, selflessness, commitment to truth, a sense of responsibility, a thirst to learn, the love of an all-embracing heart.

How we long to see humanity illumined with the love of its Lord; how we long to hear His praise on every tongue. Knowing the ardency of our wish, you know then the emotion with which, when we lay our heads upon the Most Holy Threshold, we implore Bahá'u'lláh to make you, and all who cherish His precious Faith, ever more perfect channels of His ineffable grace.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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