

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2023

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

We feel tremendous joy to be addressing a community whose high-mindedness and high resolve are befitting of its high calling. How great, how very great is our love for you, and how our spirits soar as we see your sincere and devoted striving to live lives shaped by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to proffer the life-giving waters of His Revelation to a world that is sore athirst. Your strong sense of purpose is plain to see. Expansion and consolidation, social action, and participation in the discourses of society proceed apace, and the natural coherence of these undertakings at the level of the cluster is becoming ever more visible. Nowhere is this clearer than in places where growing numbers are becoming engaged in a range of endeavours, each one a means to release the society-building power of the Faith.

In the twelve months that have elapsed since the commencement of the Nine Year Plan, we have been delighted to see how this global spiritual enterprise has inspired and galvanized the friends and given impetus to particular lines of action. An immediate focus has been to put into effect plans which ensure that, in each country and region, there emerges at least one cluster where the third milestone has been passed: a place where large numbers of people are working together and contributing to the life of a vibrant community. Conscious, however, that the goal for this twenty-five-year period is to establish an intensive programme of growth in every cluster in the world, the believers have also set about opening new clusters to the Faith as well as intensifying their efforts in places with an existing programme of growth. There is a heightened awareness of the opportunity for pioneers to arise in all parts of the world—many devoted souls are considering how they might respond to this opportunity, and many others have already filled posts, noticeably on the home front but increasingly in the international field as well. This is one of several ways in which, as we had hoped, a spirit of mutual support is being expressed by the friends everywhere. Communities where strength has been built have committed themselves to supporting the progress being made in a different place—in another cluster, region, country, or even continent—and creative means have been found to offer encouragement from afar and enable experience to be shared directly. Meanwhile, the basic approach of capturing what is being learned in a cluster, so that it can inform plans made locally and elsewhere, is widely practised. We have been gratified to see that particular attention is being paid to learning how to enhance the quality of the educational experience offered by the institute. When the institute process takes root in a community, its effects are dramatic. Witness, for instance, those centres of intense activity where the inhabitants have come to regard the training institute as a powerful instrument that is theirs: an instrument for whose sound development they have assumed principal responsibility. Knowing well that the doors of the Faith always stand wide open, the believers are learning how to give encouragement to those who are poised to enter. To walk with such souls, and to help them cross the threshold, is a privilege and a special joy; in each cultural context, there is much to be learned about the dynamics of this resonant moment of recognition and belonging. And that is not all. While in many clusters efforts to contribute to social transformation are at their earliest stages, National Spiritual Assemblies, ably supported as ever by the Counsellors, are actively seeking to learn more about how these efforts emerge from the community-building process. Discussions about the social and material well-being of a people are being cultivated within groups of families and in communities, while the friends are also finding ways to participate in meaningful discourses that are unfolding in their immediate surroundings.

Amid all we have described, the actions of the youth shine resplendent. Far from being mere passive absorbers of influence—whether the influence be benign or otherwise—they have proven

themselves bold and discerning protagonists of the Plan. Where a community has seen them in this light and created conditions for their progress, the youth have more than justified the confidence shown in them. They are teaching the Faith to their friends and making service the foundation of more meaningful friendships. Frequently, such service takes the form of educating those younger than themselves—offering them not only moral and spiritual education, but often assistance with their schooling too. Charged with a sacred responsibility to strengthen the institute process, Bahá'í youth are fulfilling our cherished hopes.

The setting for all these efforts is a deeply unsettled age. There is widespread acknowledgement that the present-day structures of society are ill-prepared to address the needs of humanity in its current travails. Much that was widely assumed to be certain and unshakeable is being questioned, and the resulting ferment is producing a longing for a unifying vision. The chorus of voices raised in support of oneness, equality, and justice shows how many share these aspirations for their societies. Of course, it is no surprise to a follower of the Blessed Beauty that hearts should long for the spiritual ideals which He propounded. But we nevertheless find it striking that, in a year when the prospects for humanity's collective progress have seldom seemed gloomier, the light of the Faith shone with astonishing brilliance in more than ten thousand conferences, attended by nearly one and a half million people, focused on the means of promoting those same ideals. Bahá'u'lláh's vision, and His exhortation to humankind to work in unity for the betterment of the world, was the centre round which diverse elements of society eagerly gathered—and no wonder, for as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained, "Every community in the world findeth in these Divine Teachings the realization of its highest aspirations." Some well-wishers of humanity might first be drawn to the Bahá'í community as a place of refuge, a shelter from a world polarized and paralysed. Yet beyond a shelter, what they find are kindred souls labouring together to build the world anew.

Much could be written about the geographic spread of the conferences, the extraordinary impetus they imparted to the new Plan, or the heartfelt expressions of joy and enthusiasm they evoked from those who attended. But in these few lines we wish to draw attention to what they signified about the development of the Cause. They were a reflection of a Bahá'í community that sees kinship, not difference. This outlook made it natural to explore the Nine Year Plan at gatherings to which all were welcome. The friends considered the Plan's implications for their societies in the company of not only individuals and families, but local leaders and authority figures as well. Bringing together so many people in one place created the conditions for a transformative conversation about spiritual and social progress, one that is unfolding the world over. The special contribution that such gatherings—at once open, uplifting, and purposeful—can make to an expanding pattern of community development in a cluster is a valuable lesson for Bahá'í institutions to bear in mind for the future.

And so the company of the faithful enter the second year of the Plan with a fresh perspective and a profound insight into the significance of what they seek to achieve. How different actions look when viewed in light of the society-building power they release! This expansive prospect allows a sustained activity to be seen as much more than an isolated act of service or just a data point. In place after place, the initiatives being pursued reveal a population learning how to take increasing responsibility for navigating the path of its own development. The resulting spiritual and social transformation manifests itself in the life of a people in a variety of ways. In the previous series of Plans, it could be seen most clearly in the promotion of spiritual education and collective worship. In this new series of Plans, increasing attention needs to be given to other processes that seek to enhance the life of a community—for example, by improving public health, protecting the environment, or drawing more effectively on the power of the arts. What is required for all these complementary aspects of a community's well-being to advance is, of course, the capacity to engage in systematic learning in all these areas—a capacity that draws on insights

arising from the Teachings and the accumulated store of human knowledge generated through scientific enquiry. As this capacity grows, much will be accomplished over the coming decades.

This expanded, society-building vision has far-reaching implications. Each community is on its own path towards its realization. But progress in one place often has features in common with progress in another. One feature is that, as capacity increases and a local or national community's powers multiply, then, in the fullness of time, the conditions required for the emergence of a Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, set out in our Riḍván 2012 message, will eventually be fulfilled. As we indicated in our message to you last Riḍván, we will periodically identify places where a Bahá'í Temple is to be raised up. We are delighted to call, at this time, for the establishment of local Houses of Worship in Kanchanpur, Nepal, and Mwinilunga, Zambia. Beyond this, we call for a national House of Worship to be raised up in Canada, in the vicinity of the long-established National Ḥazíratu'l-Quds in Toronto. These projects, and others to be initiated in the future, will benefit from the support provided to the Temples Fund by the friends in every land.

Copious are the blessings that a benevolent Lord has chosen to bestow upon His loved ones. Lofty is the calling, magnificent the prospect. Pressing are the times in which we have all been summoned to serve. Impassioned, then, are the prayers with which, on your behalf and for your tireless efforts, we supplicate at the Threshold of Bahá'u'lláh.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]