

# TRAINING INSTITUTES AND SYSTEMATIC GROWTH

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In its Ridván message of 153 the Universal House of Justice placed the establishment and development of training institutes in the context of the far-reaching changes that would characterize the progress of the Faith in this period of Bahá'í history.

The next four years will represent an extraordinary period in the history of our Faith, a turning point of epochal magnitude. What the friends throughout the world are now being asked to do is to commit themselves, their material resources, their abilities and their time to the development of a network of training institutes on a scale never before attempted.<sup>1</sup>

As we survey the development of training institutes during the Four Year Plan, we are struck by the degree to which this vision has been realized. The network of training institutes encircling the globe numbers some 350 in 170 countries, with nearly 100,000 believers having benefited from at least one institute course. The magnitude of this achievement is rivaled only by the “untold potential” that it augurs for the advancement of the process of entry by troops.

The purpose of training institutes was clarified and elaborated in the April 1998 publication entitled “Training Institutes,” a document prepared for and approved by the Universal House of Justice. On the basis of this elucidation of the institute process, national communities began to refocus their efforts, emphasizing a sequence of courses that would create capacity and commitment on the part of the friends to carry out acts of service. Greater stress was placed on decentralizing the institute process so as to reach ever-growing numbers of believers. The past two years have seen not only the expansion of training institutes worldwide but a deeper appreciation throughout the Bahá'í world of the unique and vital role training institutes must play in promoting systematic growth.

This paper presents an overview of the advancement of the institute process since the release of the April 1998 document. The analysis is framed in the guidance the House of Justice has given to National Spiritual Assemblies during the past two years in relation to training institutes. It is divided into four sections:

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## **1. EXPERIENCE WITH THE INSTITUTE PROCESS**

In its Ridván message of 156 the Universal House of Justice referred to the “demonstrated efficacy of training institutes.” In order to better understand the long-range potential of the institutes and their impact on the progress of the Faith, it may be worthwhile to consider the elements that characterize an effective training institute. What administrative structures have served well in implementing institute programs? What level of collaboration between the institutions of the Faith has helped to foster the institute process? Are there any principles of curriculum development that have been learned? Has any type of delivery system proved especially effective? To answer these questions, and others, we offer the experience of national communities around the world that have, under the guidance of the House of Justice, moved the development of training institutes forward with extraordinary rapidity and impressive results.

The document “Training Institutes,” released by the House of Justice at the 1998 International Bahá’í Convention, described the variations in national communities and how the training institute might emerge differently according to the characteristics of different countries and the nature and size of their Bahá’í communities. However, the most striking observation that can be made when surveying the growth of training institutes around the world during the past two years is that there are important parallels among the most successful programs and there is a convergence of thought and practice about the development of training institutes that has emerged from implementation of the careful guidance given by the House of Justice to this worldwide enterprise.

### **1.1 Administrative structure**

In most countries of the world the basic administrative structure for the training institutes has been to establish a national institute with an institute board. In a few national communities that have large Bahá’í populations or that cover large geographical areas, and generally where Regional Bahá’í Councils exist, regional institutes have been established with their own boards. In the majority of these cases, National Spiritual Assemblies have decided that the institute boards report to the Regional Councils, while the National Assemblies themselves set broad policy and guide the overall development of the institute process.

In all parts of the world the boards of training institutes have taken up their responsibilities with vigor, carrying out their tasks either under the supervision of the National Assembly or the appropriate Regional Council. They seem to have understood well the nature of their functions. Individuals who are appointed to the institute boards should have a readiness to learn about the challenges and promise of human resource development, be aware of the need to focus on training, and be able to work effectively in a small team. The collaboration of both arms of the Administrative Order in the appointment process has proved essential.

If a board of directors is named, its membership should be decided upon by the National Spiritual Assembly in consultation with the Counsellors and with their full support ....<sup>2</sup>

As Counsellors, National Assemblies, and the institute boards consider how to present courses to a growing number of believers, questions about the necessary administrative structures generally arise. The House of Justice has cautioned against an elaborate system of regional branches, which can be costly and generally still require believers to come to a central location:

... at this stage in your efforts to raise up human resources it is not necessary to establish regional branches, which generally involve high costs, including maintenance of facilities, equipment, and expenses for participants, such as transportation, food and housing.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than regional branches, an effective structure has been to appoint regional coordinators who oversee the extension of the institute courses to local communities within a region. As the number of study circles in an area increases, regional coordinators are needed to encourage and support the efforts of the tutors, to promote the further multiplication of study circles, and to coordinate the work of the institute with institutions in the area.

In some national communities there had been a proliferation of activities referred to as “institutes.” It was necessary to clarify that these local initiatives, largely focused on deepening while praiseworthy, were not “institutes” as called for by the House of Justice. In this connection, it is important to draw a distinction between such initiatives and the extension of institute courses to the local level as part of a national or regional program to provide training to ever-larger numbers of believers. The House of Justice explains:

As the friends gain a clearer understanding of the intent of the House of Justice in calling for the establishment of institutes, these local efforts will gradually become associated, as branches or study groups, with a regional institute serving a much larger population. In this context, what defines a region will necessarily vary.... Regardless, with the strengthening of regional institutes, the concept of a training institute will become more and more separated in the minds of the friends from that of a local deepening class or a teaching group.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 Collaboration

In its Ridván 153 message and other letters, the House of Justice called for close collaboration between the two arms of the Administration in the development of institutes. In analyzing the growth and progress of training institutes during the Four Year Plan, one of the most compelling conclusions has been the importance of consultation between the Counsellors and National Assemblies about the direction and operation of the training institutes. To the degree to which close collaboration was achieved, there was a corresponding likelihood that the training institute process would be

firmly grounded in the guidance of the House of Justice and would experience success in creating a body of confirmed and active supporters of the Faith.

In a national community there must exist a common vision between the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assembly about the character and direction of the institute process. This has been achieved where there has been “intimate involvement in institute operations” by the Counsellors and their auxiliaries. Furthermore, the collaboration of Counsellors with those Regional Bahá’í Councils that have responsibility for administering regional training institutes, and of Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members with training institute boards, has provided the opportunity for this arm of the Administration to further its sacred purpose of diffusing the Divine Fragrances and promoting learning. As explained in the Ridván 153 message, the character of institutes “harmonizes with, and provides scope for the exercise of, the educational responsibilities of the Auxiliary Board members.”<sup>5</sup>

The House of Justice has emphasized in several instances the necessity of the ongoing collaboration between the two arms of the Administration:

This matter calls for an intensification of the collaboration between the Continental Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies. For the success of these training institutes will depend in very large measure on the active involvement of the Continental Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members in their operation. Particularly will it be necessary for Auxiliary Board members to have a close working relationship with institutes....<sup>6</sup>

A process of decision-making must be arrived at, in consultation between you and the Counsellors, regarding the preparation and approval of the annual plans and budgets for the institutes. This would involve in each case, of course, close interaction between the Counsellors and the institutes or institute boards....<sup>7</sup>

In the functioning of the training institute boards we have witnessed the close cooperation of the two arms of the Administration, particularly the participation of Auxiliary Board members, fulfilling the House of Justice’s expectation that the “intimate involvement in institute operations should now become a part of the evolving functions of these officers of the Faith.”<sup>8</sup>

From these guidelines, you can see that it is entirely acceptable for Auxiliary Board members to be appointed by the National Assembly in agreement with the Counsellors to the board of an institute. Of course, their participation in the institute work is not limited to membership on boards of directors. As mentioned in your letter, many will also serve as coordinators and act as teachers. Whether they take up these responsibilities on a full-time basis is a matter for them to decide in consultation with the Counsellors concerned.<sup>9</sup>

In most countries Auxiliary Board members are serving on institute boards. However, it is in those places where the guidance of the House of Justice on the critical role of the Board members in the development of the institute process has been fully implemented that one can observe the greatest progress.

In countries where Regional Bahá’í Councils exist, close interaction between the Councils and the training institutes is vitally important and can create “a galvanic coherence of the processes effecting expansion and consolidation in a region,” and “the practical matching of the training services of institutes to the developmental needs of local communities.”<sup>10</sup>

### 1.3 Curriculum

At the heart of the training institute is the curriculum selected by the institute board, in consultation with the National Spiritual Assembly and the Counsellors.

In view of the experience gained thus far, you are urged to outline, in consultation with Counsellors and the boards, a sequence of a few courses designed to endow the friends in your community with the spiritual insights, knowledge and skills needed to serve the Faith with increasing effectiveness.<sup>11</sup>

Since any curriculum is a vehicle for achieving educational goals, the most effective curriculum for institutes has proved to be one that truly trains the believers for service in the fields of expansion and consolidation. Early on in the Four Year Plan it became apparent in many countries that although deepening was essential and must continue, the in-depth study of a book or specialized subject in the institutes would not necessarily result in mobilizing large numbers of Bahá'ís to become active teachers. There are, of course, many important subjects in which believers need to deepen, but the House of Justice in several letters has discouraged training institutes from incorporating specialized topics into their programs at the expense of a focus on a basic sequence of courses.

The House of Justice has reservations, however, on the desirability of involving the Training Institutes in this program. The Training Institutes should be developing and applying a coherent, systematic program for increasing the human resources of the Bahá'í community. Naturally, as part of such a curriculum there will be place for including reference to the law of Huqúqu'lláh and the whole matter of supporting the funds of the Faith as a part of the individual life of the believer and an essential element of Bahá'í community life. However, to involve the Training Institutes in a specific project of educating the members of the community in the law of Huqúqu'lláh, or in preparing training materials, would seem to be a diversion of their main task.<sup>12</sup>

In designing the program for the education of the members of the Bahá'í community in the Teachings, and in selecting the curricula of summer schools and similar occasions, a National Spiritual Assembly should include all aspects of life, including the choosing of a spouse, but the House of Justice feels that it is important for this to be done in context. It is not felt, however, that this specialized subject is one which would be suitable for training institutes, which have their own clearly defined purpose.<sup>13</sup>

#### 1.3.1 A systematic approach

The April 1998 document on training institutes indicates that it is a complex task to design curriculum materials that combine the acquisition of knowledge and skills with the cultivation of inner qualities in a sequence that gradually prepares believers for higher and higher levels of service. For this reason national communities were encouraged to utilize materials already prepared in other parts of the world that employed a systematic approach and were designed to empower believers to arise and serve.

The House of Justice is greatly encouraged by the proposed plan of activities of your institute and is particularly pleased to note that it is concentrating on the execution of its program, which draws upon readily available materials, and has not allowed its energies to be consumed in planning and design.<sup>14</sup>

As part of its mandate to assess institute curricula that are available in the Bahá'í world, the International Teaching Centre has found the Ruhi Institute materials to be particularly appropriate. Many national communities are using the Ruhi Institute curriculum either as the focus of their training institute or as one of its tracks of study.

The Ruhi Institute curriculum had been tested and adapted over many years. It has enabled the friends in different countries to get the institute system up and running in a short time. Rather than having the participants be passive listeners to a wide array of unconnected talks, the Ruhi Institute materials seek to engage the friends fully in the process of learning. Bahá'ís with diverse cultural and educational backgrounds have found the curriculum's deceptively simple approach, based heavily on connecting the believers to the Creative Word, both appealing and empowering.

Even in those countries where the Ruhi Institute materials have been chosen as the main curriculum or as one of the institute tracks, modifications and adaptations for local conditions have occasionally been made. In a few countries a beginning course has been developed for new believers which precedes Book 1. In some areas the Ruhi Institute books have been supplemented with other materials to suit the local requirements. Over time, through systematic educational experience, other sequential curricula will be developed in various parts of the world that display the same coherence that the Ruhi Institute materials have achieved but are derived from the experience of different national communities.

### 1.3.2 Sequence of courses

The Universal House of Justice has stressed the importance of a sequence of courses in preparing the friends for the expansion and consolidation work:

... it may be timely for you to consider introducing another component into your institute program. Unlike the courses designed for deepening the generality of the believers, this component would be concerned with helping a certain percentage of the friends, especially young people with some formal education, enhance their capacity to perform the tasks associated with an accelerated process of expansion and consolidation. It would entail choosing a sequence of courses which, building on one another, gradually endow the students with the knowledge, skills and qualities needed to serve the Faith with increasing effectiveness.<sup>15</sup>

Great strides have been made in involving the friends in training institute courses, but more attention needs to be given to ensure that they systematically proceed through a sequence of courses.

Once the sequence has been selected, a steadily increasing number of believers are recruited to enter the first basic course, and relatively significant percentages are then helped to reach higher and higher courses, enhancing thereby their capacity for service.<sup>16</sup>

In countries with small Bahá'í populations a large number of the friends have taken not only one course but completed successive courses in a sequence. However, experience has shown that in countries with large Bahá'í populations, most participants study only the first level course. In a community like India, where about 34,000 believers have completed level one, this is undoubtedly

a great achievement. Nevertheless, as the number of those entering the institute program steadily increases, so too should the percentage of believers who go on to study the subsequent courses in the sequence. In this way, the development of human resources is characterized by the image of an ever-expanding pyramid. The size of the “pyramid” is an indication of a national community’s success in creating human resources to meet its needs for the tasks of expansion and consolidation.

In countries where the human resources are growing, other tracks of study, in addition to the basic sequence of courses, have been introduced. These tracks may focus on such areas as children’s education, literacy training, or health.

## 1.4 Delivery systems

Worldwide, the Bahá’ís have experimented with different types of delivery systems in order to extend the reach of their national or regional training institutes. In addition to courses in central locations, several distance education delivery systems have been successfully implemented in a number of countries. These include extension courses, where the program of the national institute is held in an area that can draw on Bahá’ís from a cluster of villages or towns; institute campaigns, where an intensive series of classes is given at the local level over a period of a few weeks; and study circles, where a small group of believers come together on a regular basis in their own locality with a trained tutor who helps them to progress through a selected sequence of courses.

### 1.4.1 Distance education

During the first two years of the Four Year Plan, in the early stages in the establishment of many institutes, groups of believers were brought to one central facility, either in the capital or in a regional center, for a week or a few weekends to attend training courses and then returned to their home communities. It became apparent, however, that the number of believers who would be able to obtain training with this approach soon reaches a limit. Whether because of the sheer numbers of friends that must pass through the training or because of the cost and inconvenience of traveling and staying in a residential program, distance education has proved to be an effective delivery system. In many instances the House of Justice has stressed the value of this decentralized approach:

What can expand the institute’s coverage is for a sequence of a few well-conceived courses to be selected and a band of tutors trained, who then offer the courses at the local level throughout the region to groups of eager believers. In this way, the number of those studying in the institute program at various levels steadily increases.<sup>17</sup>

A decentralized approach to the delivery of courses does not transfer responsibility for training to the local institutions but is a system adopted by the national or regional institute to extend its program to the grassroots. In several cases, the House of Justice has clarified the intent of decentralization as described in the April 1998 document “Training Institutes”:

The solution does not seem to be the establishment of local institutes, independent of the national institute.... these run the danger of turning into deepening classes. This is not to say that every local community should not continue to conduct regular deepening programs. But, as far as human resource development is concerned, the methodology that seems to be most effective in reaching believers at the local level is the formation of study circles which are coordinated by a national institute or one of its branches.<sup>18</sup>

### 1.4.2 Study circles

Of the three above-mentioned delivery systems, the most widely practiced on all continents is the study circle, sometimes called a study group, a circle of study, or a circle of learning. The House of Justice has encouraged this flexible, low cost form of distance education:

Initially, such courses might need to be offered at the institute sites, but, as a growing number of tutors are trained, study circles could eventually be formed throughout the country. Such a system of distance education seems particularly well suited to the geographical makeup of Papua New Guinea.<sup>19</sup>

... the system of delivery of courses through study circles, a system which we understand the national institute of Bolivia is attempting to gradually establish throughout the country, is designed to bring the institute courses to the level of each locality. In this case, a sequence of courses is offered to small groups of believers in villages and towns by tutors trained by the institute itself or a branch operating in the region. Efforts to put into place such a vast system can only flourish in an environment characterized by a spirit of unity and collaboration among all the institutions of the Faith.<sup>20</sup>

A distinguishing feature of study circles is that in many countries, and across diverse cultures, they have created a new dynamic within the community and have become nuclei of community life and catalysts for teaching, service, and community development. In addition to study of the institute courses, the members of the study circle, both Bahá'is and non-Bahá'is often participate in service and extracurricular activities that bind the group together in fellowship and attract others to this mode of learning. Having experienced the participatory learning style of the courses, the members of the study circle gradually take on a stronger commitment to actively serve and apply the knowledge and skills they are gaining to the work of the Faith. Some members of study circles are eventually trained as tutors and then initiate their own study circles.

After studying one course, many of the members of a study circle will stay together to go on to the next course, but some may drop out until they are ready and able to pursue a subsequent course. As friends move on to higher level courses, and other friends join at various points in the sequence, the membership of a study circle can gradually change. Although members of study circles will often engage in social and service activities together, no feelings of exclusivity should be allowed to develop among them. Furthermore, the study circles should be guided by the spirit of consultation in planning recreation, teaching, and service activities.

Since a key purpose of the study circle is to raise human resources that are to be utilized in the community, the Local Spiritual Assemblies, the area teaching committees, and the Auxiliary Board members will need to know where they are located and draw on their members for the tasks of teaching and consolidation. Several letters written on behalf of the House of Justice address the importance of collaboration in supporting the friends in their teaching endeavors:

... in a locality where the Local Spiritual Assembly is functioning, it would collaborate with the national institute or its branch in supporting the work of the study circles, while pursuing its own plans for the expansion and consolidation of the Cause.<sup>21</sup>

Personal teaching requires stimulation from the institutions; it must be fostered by National and Local Spiritual Assemblies, on the one hand, and the Counsellors and their auxiliaries, on the

other. The institutions should also nurture and support the members of study circles and other individuals in the community in acts of service that come about through personal initiative.

### 1.4.3 Tutors and tutor training

The experience of the past few years has shown that the selection and training of tutors are crucial for the extension of the institute process to the grassroots and for the success of the study circles. In many parts of the world this realization has led to a focus on raising up an evergrowing number of tutors, either from among the participants in the study circles or, initially, from experienced believers who take part in events that combine institute courses with tutor training.

Since the effectiveness of the tutors is critical to the success of the institute process, more and more attention has been given to the content of the training, the skills needed to organize a study circle and lead the participants through the courses, and the attitudes necessary both to nurture the participants in their learning and maintain the cohesion of the group. Tutors require training in how to keep the participants focused on the material, how to formulate questions that stimulate reflection, and how to foster active participation within the group. They need to combine the qualities of love, humility, and patience, with the dedication, perseverance, and commitment required to create a spiritual atmosphere conducive to learning. It should be emphasized that tutor training is not a one-time event but an ongoing activity where tutors come together periodically to share experiences and ideas. In many countries educated youth have proved to be an excellent source for institute tutors.

Regional coordinators, who often come from the ranks of tutors, will need these same abilities, plus some administrative capacity to maintain records, track the progress of the study circles, organize training programs, supervise tutors, and coordinate the work of the institute with the activities of the institutions in the area.

## 2. INSTITUTES IN ACTION

### 2.1 Creating human resources

As believers in each country advance through a sequence of courses and their skills and abilities are enhanced, the responsibility then falls on the institutions of the Faith to see that the energies, talents, and newly acquired skills of these friends are channelled in some form of active service to the Cause. In this regard, the House of Justice has pointed out:

Ample opportunities should be given to them to put into practice what they have learned, and in this connection, you will need to create within your community an encouraging environment, one in which the friends feel empowered to step forward, whatever their capacities may be, and take up the work of the Faith.<sup>22</sup>

One of the most exciting aspects of a review of the accomplishments of the Four Year Plan has been to survey the development of the training institutes worldwide and to take note of the successes national communities have reported in advancing the process of entry by troops. Each continent has had its own challenges and record of achievements in the growth of training

institutes. Overall, however, a pattern of the institute process has emerged that is not confined to one country or part of the world but represents a common direction for the Bahá'í world in its development of human resources.

Previously Africa had several years of experience with institutes, but a shift had to be made from offering deepening courses to establishing training programs. In order to implement this new orientation, a focus was placed on tutor training and the translation of institute materials into French and Portuguese, as well as many local languages. Training institutes in several national communities in Africa have made significant advances, extending the reach of the institute process throughout each country while also initiating social and economic development activities. The Uganda Bahá'í Institute for Development has an impressive delivery system of courses; more than 1,500 friends have completed a level one course and 35 percent of them have gone through higher level courses. In Zambia the training institute has had similar success. Nearly 1,000 individuals have completed the first course and one-third of these participants have completed higher courses in the sequence. Both Uganda and Zambia have systematically trained tutors—185 and 144 respectively—in order to support their delivery systems.

The Americas have witnessed a tremendous acceleration in the creation of human resources. There are more than 500 study circles in Latin America, and nearly 1,000 tutors have been trained. In Brazil alone the development of human resources has been impressive: there are 568 tutors and 260 study circles, with more than 5,000 believers participating in the institute process of which some 400 are junior youth. The Ruhi Institute, located in Colombia, has provided training to more than 40 members of National Assemblies and institute boards and has prepared a group of 16 resource persons who can advise institutes in different countries about their programs. In the United States, training in the methodology of the Core Curriculum, one of the tracks of the institutes in that country, has been provided to Bahá'ís from more than 52 countries.

In all 39 countries of Asia that have National Assemblies, training institutes have been established and have recorded the highest levels of participation, in terms of absolute numbers as well as percentages. Approximately 60,000 friends have attended at least one training institute course, and of those, some 34,000 were in India. Nepal has shown a high degree of participation with approximately 20 percent of the Bahá'ís having completed the level one course. In Russia and the other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States a large percentage of the national communities have attended at least one institute course—for example, 60 percent of the Bahá'ís in Armenia and 35 percent of the friends in Kazakhstan. In the Arabian countries, partly because of the small size of their communities, the percentages rise even higher—76 percent in Bahrain, 43 percent in Kuwait, and 36 percent in Oman.

This widespread involvement of the believers in the institutes is reflected in the achievements the national communities have made in the translation of curriculum into local languages—14 in India, 10 in Southeast Asia, and 5 in Central Asia. Most of the institutes in Asia, as in Africa, have also developed distinct tracks in their institutes so that in addition to a basic sequence, there are programs for literacy training, moral classes, and in some cases “higher learning” courses.

Like the institutes in Africa, those in Australasia are focusing their energies increasingly on the offering of training programs, rather than deepening courses alone. Outside resource persons are being utilized to train English- and French-speaking tutors for Australia, New Zealand, and 10

Pacific islands. A sequence of courses and study circles have been established in several states of Australia and on the major islands of Hawaii. In Papua New Guinea the institute organized an efficient network for delivering courses, mostly deepening in nature, to nearly two-thirds of the believers. Now the institute is focusing on delivering a sequence of courses that will train a percentage of these friends in the tasks of expansion and consolidation.

Europe refocused its training institutes on a sequence of courses and a decentralized delivery system. From the Baltics to the Balkans a host of 125 tutors has been trained and continent-wide resource persons are also being identified to assist national communities with training institutes. Over a nine-month period 12 regional tutor training seminars were held in England, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Albania, Romania, and Belarus. Out of this effort scores of study circles have been launched in country after country.

## **2.2 Impact on teaching and growth**

Although there is always a range of factors that contribute to growth in a community, reports of achievements in the teaching field from Counsellors and National Assemblies indicate that these developments are increasingly influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the institute process.

In Bangladesh, where the training institute process is well established, over 11,000 believers entered the Faith in the third year of the Four Year Plan. A survey carried out by members of the institutions in that country determined that nearly 8,000 of these enrollments were the result of individual teaching by institute participants, particularly the tutors. In South Africa, it has been reported that between the first two years of the Four Year Plan and the third year of the Plan, when the institute process was well under way, there was an increase of 40 percent in the number of new enrollments. The National Spiritual Assembly has concluded that this level of growth is due primarily to individual initiative stimulated by the training institute courses.

Local teaching projects and teaching campaigns have been taken up with increasing vigor and have provided a major avenue of service for institute participants. In addition to the 30 percent increase since 1998 in the number of teaching projects funded by the Teaching Centre, news of several hundred locally initiated projects, many of them self-supporting, demonstrated the upswing in the tempo of teaching in different parts of the world.

Reports also suggest that there has been a marked increase in the number of firesides around the world, an indication of the level of teaching undertaken at the initiative of the individual. In Ireland a national program entitled "Core Project," whose goal is to establish 20 firesides, has been operating in conjunction with a series of training institute courses. A similar trend has been noted in Slovakia, which launched a national fireside campaign during the last year of the Four Year Plan. In the southern region of the United States individual initiative has manifested itself in a growing number of firesides, particularly by institute participants. There has also been a notable rise in the number of firesides across the southern part of Australia in Victoria, New South Wales, and Western Australia, as well as in some island communities of the Pacific, such as Tonga, where over 660 souls have entered the Faith in the last three years. The National Spiritual Assembly of Japan has far exceeded its fireside goal for the Four Year Plan.

Parallel to this, and contributing to the overall spiritual atmosphere needed for teaching and growth, is the dramatic increase in the number of devotional meetings worldwide. The April 1998 document on training institutes mentions the establishment of devotional meetings as one of the

first acts of service that those who have completed institute courses can carry out. Such meetings have been initiated in several countries of Asia, where hundreds exist in India alone, and in many countries of Latin America.

### **2.3 Direct instruments of teaching**

In the same document on training institutes it was suggested that Bahá'í communities that are small in size but have a large percentage of knowledgeable believers consider having their institutes open courses to non-Bahá'ís. A number of enrollments directly resulting from institute courses have been reported in countries such as France, Greece, Korea, and Nepal, as well as in countries with larger Bahá'í populations such as Ethiopia, Taiwan, Turkey, and the United States. In addition, the Baltic States, Belarus, Finland, and the Ukraine are opening some of their courses to non-Bahá'ís. Countries that have experienced large-scale expansion, such as India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, are also benefiting from this approach to teaching. These countries have found that the majority of non-Bahá'ís who participate in the institute programs accept the Faith by the completion of the first course.

## **3. SYSTEMATIZATION OF TEACHING (AREA GROWTH PROGRAMS)**

In order to realize the potential for growth that the training of human resources has brought about, attention must be given to the systematization of teaching efforts. In its message to the Bahá'ís of the world announcing the Twelve Month Plan and the Five Year Plan, the House of Justice presented this challenge to communities:

It is essential that, during the one-year effort, national and regional institutes everywhere bring into full operation the programs and systems that they have now devised. National communities should enter the Five Year Plan confident that the acquisition of knowledge, qualities and skills of service by large contingents of believers, with the aid of a sequence of courses, will proceed unhindered. Ample attention must also be given to further systematization of teaching efforts, whether undertaken by the individual or directed by the institutions.<sup>23</sup>

With the further systematization of teaching efforts in mind, the International Teaching Centre has identified certain patterns of expansion and consolidation that lead to a process of accelerated and sustained growth. This approach to systematized teaching is being developed in the context of an "Area Growth Program," which focuses on a relatively small geographical area with a manageable number of localities. At the heart of the Area Growth Program is a systematic institute process under the direction of the national or regional institute. As a growing number of believers pass through the courses of the training institute, the pool of human resources for various expansion and consolidation undertakings increases. Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will encourage these believers to utilize their newly acquired capabilities in teaching the Faith and in acts of service, such as holding devotional meetings, deepening one's fellow believers, and conducting children's classes. Grassroots involvement, where the local believers consult together, take action, and support one another in individual or group activities, is a fundamental characteristic of an Area Growth Program.

Institute participants, as well as other local believers, will take part in area-wide seminars and conferences, regional teaching campaigns, and small socio-economic development projects. Gradually, local collective endeavors will emerge, area committees and Local Spiritual

Assemblies will formulate their own plans for expansion and consolidation, and the friends will begin to shoulder the responsibilities of systematic growth in their communities.

The process of learning about growth that was launched with the Four Year Plan has confirmed the vision the House of Justice gave in its Ridván message of 153 that advancing the process of entry by troops depends on raising up large numbers of trained believers. As increasing numbers of Bahá'ís go through the institute courses and, in so doing, develop a stronger Bahá'í identity and desire to serve, a dynamic for growth is created in our communities. Even if only a fraction of the participants become active teachers, having more and more Bahá'ís proceed through a sequence of courses generates a spirit that motivates the believers and revitalizes the community. For this reason the strategy of the Area Growth Programs is to have the teaching and expansion work revolve around the institutes.

#### **4. CHALLENGES FOR TRAINING INSTITUTES**

The extraordinary growth of institutes around the world has brought with it a number of challenges. Some of these are general issues that many communities face while others are specific to continents or individual countries. A general priority is for national communities to reflect on the achievements of their institutes, to assess the efficacy of their approaches, and to modify certain elements in light of experience or new circumstances. This analysis and reflection should take place periodically between National Assemblies and Counsellors and by institute boards, Auxiliary Board members, and Regional Councils where applicable.

##### **4.1 Quality and effectiveness**

During the Four Year Plan, most national communities worked on the establishment and initial functioning of the institute process. At the start, a focus on generating institutional capacity to deliver a few basic courses generally took precedence over a concern with program quality. Gradually, increasing attention is being given to the challenge of striking a balance between quantity and quality. While it remains a priority to think in terms of reaching large numbers of friends with the institute program, attention at the same time must be given to improving its overall effectiveness. As institutes strive to upgrade the quality of training and the delivery of courses, they will come closer to fulfilling the aim of raising up “large numbers of believers who are trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love.”<sup>24</sup>

##### **4.2 Illiteracy**

A great number of countries suffer from low literacy rates. In some populations or areas, the rate is so low as to pose a challenge to the institute process. The House of Justice has stressed that institutes need not be held back at the outset because of this concern.

It should be remembered that not every believer in Tanzania will necessarily participate in your institute program. Rather, a certain percentage of the friends will need to receive training in order to enhance their capacity to carry out the tasks of expansion and consolidation, including the teaching and deepening of the generality of the believers. At this early stage in the establishment of the institute, then, the question of illiteracy should not be a central concern. The immediate challenge before you is to help a large number of the many capable members of your community, especially young people with some formal education, progress through a sequence of a few basic courses. Once this has been accomplished, it may be

possible for the institute to expand its program to include a second track of courses for the development of human resources in the area of social and economic development, including literacy.<sup>25</sup>

Although the present institute courses are geared to believers with basic education, efforts to address problems of illiteracy can be given more attention as the institute develops, possibly through offering a literacy course in a track for social and economic development. This would ensure that there will continue to be a ready population to undergo training and also guarantee that certain groups with a high degree of illiteracy, such as women, are not left behind in the process of developing human resources.

### 4.3 Resource persons

Institute resource persons are Bahá'ís who have had substantial training and national level experience in the development of training institutes. The last two years of the Four Year Plan witnessed a greater appreciation by the institutions of the Faith of the use of resource persons. Deployed at the discretion of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, they have played a significant and beneficial role in consulting with national and regional institutions about the institute process and in the training of coordinators and tutors. Excellent results have been achieved from such training programs on all five continents. The Teaching Centre would like to see a core of such individuals on every continent, available to assist institutions with clarifying concepts, training tutors, and enhancing the capacity of institutes. These outside consultants, however, are no substitute for the process of evaluation and reflection that National Assemblies, together with the Counsellors, must undertake and sustain in order for the training institutes to become fully indigenous and institutionalized.

### 4.4 Infrastructure

In the initial stages in the growth of an institute there has not been an emphasis on acquiring buildings for the program. In this respect the House of Justice has indicated:

With regard to the permanent training institute, you will need office space to maintain the files and administration of this organization, but the institute courses will need to reach a widely spread Bahá'í population. Access to physical facilities for institute courses will of course be necessary, but should probably not require the acquisition of permanent institute buildings.... The House of Justice is concerned that matters related to the acquisition and maintenance of a new institute building ... would require resources which would be better used for the development of the institute program itself.<sup>26</sup>

During the past four years similar advice from the House of Justice has also been given to national communities with extensive institute programs. However, as the 26 December 1995 message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors indicated, the institute, "at some stage of its development, may require a building of its own."<sup>27</sup> No doubt the question of infrastructure will soon need to be considered carefully, particularly in countries where large numbers of friends are moving through a sequence of courses.

The question of infrastructure is related not only to buildings but also to arrangements needed to maintain records and statistics, to stay in contact with students, and to put in place an efficient tracking system. The House of Justice has commented on such developments:

It now wishes us to commend you on the steps you have taken to create a Desk at your National Office dedicated to the systematization and dissemination of information on

human resource development. Keeping the community informed of the status of your institute program and the accomplishments of those taking part in it will help you considerably to maintain enthusiasm among the friends for training. In this and many other ways, the Human Resource Desk will undoubtedly be of great assistance to you.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4.5 Deputization of institute staff

In addition to collaborating with National Assemblies on the areas of budget, management, curriculum, and course delivery, Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members have been called upon to arouse the commitment of the friends to promote the teaching work through the deputization of institute staff, an opportunity introduced by the Universal House of Justice in its Ridván 153 message. This new measure has given the friends yet another avenue to fulfill Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to propagate the Faith of God and that "Whoso is unable, it is his duty to appoint him who will, in his stead, proclaim this Revelation. . . ." The House of Justice has explained how the call for deputization falls within the framework of teaching and depends on individual response:

With the creation of training institutes across the globe, an added opportunity for a more direct involvement in deputization presents itself to the individual; the House of Justice trusts therefore that the friends can be helped to feel some connection with the specific centers of teaching activity to which their offerings for deputization are sent.<sup>29</sup>

Although local, regional and national institutions are informing the friends of the importance of their sacred teaching obligation and of the opportunities for deputization, the Counsellors and Auxiliary Board members are in an advantageous position to reach individuals at the grassroots and summon forth their interest and commitment to this worldwide enterprise. The House of Justice has explained:

It is for this reason that the Continental Counsellors and their auxiliaries have been called upon to play a distinctive role in this matter as officers bearing a particular responsibility for propagation, for the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants operate at the grassroots of the community and are able readily not only to stimulate individuals to teach but also to urge them, if their material circumstances allow, to respond to the need for deputization.<sup>30</sup>

It is up to the Counsellors and Board members to provide the friends with detailed information about current needs for deputization, including the level of support required by institute teachers in various parts of the world.

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In conclusion, it might be said that the "dynamic state of transformation" referred to in the Ridván 156 message aptly describes the impact of training institutes on our communities during the Four Year Plan. The institute has become central to the life of the community and is beginning to generate human resources to a degree that was not imagined at the outset of the Plan. Clearly it is the institute process that is at the core of the coherent vision that is guiding us in advancing the process of entry by troops. As the House of Justice expressed in the same message: "Understanding of the

necessity for systematization in the development of human resources is everywhere taking hold.”<sup>31</sup> It is also understood that the process upon which we have embarked through the training institutes is a long-term one.

The learning that has taken place about the systematic development of human resources will now be extended to the process of learning about the systematization of teaching. Through the implementation of Area Growth Programs around the world a new body of experience will emerge that will inform our approach to teaching and our strategies about growth for the next two decades. These efforts at systematic and unabated action represent the deep desire and commitment of every Bahá’í “to fulfill the intentions of a Plan whose major aim is to accelerate that process which will make it possible for growing numbers of the world’s people to find the Object of their quest and thus to build a united, peaceful and prosperous life.”<sup>32</sup>

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>1</sup> Ridván 153 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>2</sup> Message dated 26 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
  - <sup>3</sup> Letter dated 19 November 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Spiritual Assembly of Chad
  - <sup>4</sup> Letter dated 10 August 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States
  - <sup>5</sup> Ridván 153 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>6</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>7</sup> Letter dated 9 December 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Russian Federation
  - <sup>8</sup> Ridván 153 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>9</sup> Letter dated 19 October 1997 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer
  - <sup>10</sup> Ridván 156 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>11</sup> Letter dated 27 March 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Vanuatu
  - <sup>12</sup> Letter dated 18 March 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom
  - <sup>13</sup> Letter dated 18 January 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer
  - <sup>14</sup> Letter dated 29 July 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Bolivia
  - <sup>15</sup> Letter dated 9 October 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Papua New Guinea
  - <sup>16</sup> Letter dated 16 March 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Tonga
  - <sup>17</sup> Letter dated 14 April 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Cote d'Ivoire
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  - <sup>19</sup> Letter dated 9 October 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Papua New Guinea
  - <sup>20</sup> Letter dated 10 December 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer
  - <sup>21</sup> Letter dated 5 October 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice an individual believer
  - <sup>22</sup> Letter dated 3 March 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Spiritual Assembly of Hong Kong
  - <sup>23</sup> Letter dated 26 November 1999 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>24</sup> Ridván 153 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>25</sup> Letter dated 20 May 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Tanzania
  - <sup>26</sup> Letter dated 22 September 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Norway
  - <sup>27</sup> Message dated 26 December 1995 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors
  - <sup>28</sup> Letter dated 10 April 1998 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of India
  - <sup>29</sup> Letter dated 24 August 1999 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States
  - <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
  - <sup>31</sup> Ridván 156 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world
  - <sup>32</sup> Ibid.