



The Five Year Plan

2011-2016

Messages
of the
Universal
House
of Justice

6th edition

The Five Year Plan

2011-2016

Messages of the Universal House of Justice
with Addendum

. . . in the system thus created to develop its human resources, the community of the Greatest Name possesses an instrument of limitless potentialities. Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order.

—The Universal House of Justice



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Preface

Once more the Bahá'í world stands at the threshold of a new stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Once more the House of Justice has opened to our eyes a new horizon. The letters contained in this volume provide a vision of the progress of the Faith, clarify the path of development for each cluster, explain how to strengthen the elements of a growth program, describe the extent of our learning, outline opportunities for greater involvement in society, recall the Guardian's prerequisites for success in any teaching enterprise, clarify the need for the enhancement of institutional capacity at all levels, seek consonance among the Plan's three protagonists, remind us of the part this work plays in contributing to building of a new civilization, and set before our eyes the example of the beloved Master during His travels to the West.

The Five Year Plan, 2011-2016, is the fourth in a series of plans that will take us to the end of the first century of the Formative Age, all of which have a single aim: to advance the process of entry by troops. The messages of the House of Justice explain how far we have come toward meeting this aim and vividly describe what still remains for us to do in the years ahead.

In 1916 and 1917, 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed the Tablets of the Divine Plan, calling for the friends to carry the light of Bahá'u'lláh's Cause throughout the planet. He stated: "Now is the time for you to divest yourselves of the garment of attachment to this world that perisheth, to be wholly severed from the physical world, become

heavenly angels, and travel to these countries.” “O that I could travel,” was His fervent appeal, “even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of ‘Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá’ in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the Divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.” And He added: “I am hopeful from the favors of His Highness the Lord of Bestowals, that the friends of God during such a time may become the secret cause of the illumination of the hearts of humanity, breathing the breath of life upon the spirits—whose praiseworthy results may become conducive to the glory and exaltation of humankind throughout all eternity.”

Throughout his ministry, Shoghi Effendi developed the capacity of the Bahá’í world to systematically execute the provisions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Plan. He first instructed the believers to build the administration intended to be the instrument for the collective implementation of that divine charter. He patiently assisted the friends to become more effective in their teaching and to organize national plans of action to spread and develop the Faith. In the last and crowning stage of his work, he gathered the believers in a common global crusade, which resulted in the opening of more than one hundred countries and territories, the establishment of over forty National and hundreds of Local Assemblies, and the initiation of the process of entry by troops. The light of the Cause had been carried to most of the world, but it required a still wider diffusion, a vast increase in numbers, a greater capacity and complexity of community life, a stronger administrative foundation, and a further systematization of effort.

On the firm basis laid by the Guardian, the House of Justice has extended our work and illumined the

way forward. With all countries opened, a new arena of some fifteen thousand clusters has been defined. Five thousand of these are to have a program of growth in this Plan, and each one will strive to advance as far as possible toward the frontiers of learning where hundreds of workers serve the needs of thousands in a dynamic pattern of community life with collective devotions, child and junior youth education, study circles, and teaching at its core. The rest will assuredly be conquered in future plans that will increasingly demonstrate the society-building power of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. “Indeed,” the House of Justice states, “the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal. Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan.”

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April 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

With hearts filled with admiration for the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, we are pleased to announce that, as this most joyous Riḍván season opens, there is in every continent of the globe a fresh complement of intensive programs of growth under way, raising the total number worldwide over the 1,500 mark and securing the goal of the Five Year Plan, one year in advance of its conclusion. We bow our heads in gratitude to God for this astounding achievement, this signal victory. All who have labored in the field will appreciate the bounty He has bestowed on His community in granting it a full year to strengthen the pattern of expansion and consolidation now everywhere established, in preparation for the tasks it will be called upon to undertake in its next global enterprise—a plan of five years' duration, the fifth in a series with the explicit aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. 1.1

We feel moved, as we take pause on this festive occasion, to make clear that what evokes such a deep sense of pride and gratitude in our hearts is not so much the numerical feat you have achieved, remarkable as it is, but a combination of developments at the more profound level of culture, to which this accomplishment attests. Chief among them is the rise we have observed in the capacity of the friends to converse with others on spiritual matters and to speak with ease about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation. They have 1.2

understood well that teaching is a basic requirement of a life of generous giving.

1.3 In recent messages we have expressed joy at witnessing the steady increase in the tempo of teaching across the globe. The discharge of this fundamental spiritual obligation by the individual believer has always been, and continues to be, an indispensable feature of Bahá'í life. What the establishment of 1,500 intensive programs of growth has made evident is how courageous and deliberate the rank and file of the believers have become in stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside. Even the most modest estimates suggest that there are now tens of thousands who participate in periodic campaigns to establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.

1.4 In their efforts to present the essentials of the Faith plainly and unequivocally, the believers have benefited greatly from the illustrative example in Book 6 of the Ruhi Institute. Where the logic underlying that presentation is appreciated, and the urge to convert it into a formula overcome, it gives rise to a conversation between two souls—a conversation distinguished by the depth of understanding achieved and the nature of the relationship established. To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation. Whether the first contact with such newly found friends elicits an invitation for them to enroll in the Bahá'í community or to participate in one of its activities is not an overwhelming

concern. More important is that every soul feel welcome to join the community in contributing to the betterment of society, commencing a path of service to humanity on which, at the outset or further along, formal enrollment can occur.

1.5 The significance of this development should not be underestimated. In every cluster, once a consistent pattern of action is in place, attention needs to be given to extending it more broadly through a network of co-workers and acquaintances, while energies are, at the same time, focused on smaller pockets of the population, each of which should become a center of intense activity. In an urban cluster, such a center of activity might best be defined by the boundaries of a neighborhood; in a cluster that is primarily rural in character, a small village would offer a suitable social space for this purpose. Those who serve in these settings, both local inhabitants and visiting teachers, would rightly view their work in terms of community building. To assign to their teaching efforts such labels as “door-to-door”, even though the first contact may involve calling upon the residents of a home without prior notice, would not do justice to a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage—meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives—may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of

these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighborhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. A rhythm of community life should gradually emerge, then, commensurate with the capacity of an expanding nucleus of individuals committed to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order.

1.6 Within this context, receptivity manifests itself in a willingness to participate in the process of community building set in motion by the core activities. In cluster after cluster where an intensive program of growth is now in operation, the task before the friends this coming year is to teach within one or more receptive populations, employing a direct method in their exposition of the fundamentals of their Faith, and find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighborhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation. If the friends persist in their efforts to learn the ways and methods of community building in small settings in this way, the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith will, we are certain, move by several orders of magnitude within grasp.

1.7 To meet this challenge, the believers and the institutions that serve them will have to strengthen the institute process in the cluster, increasing significantly within its borders the number of those capable of acting as tutors of study circles; for it should be recognized that the opportunity now open to the friends to foster a vibrant community life in neighborhoods and villages, characterized by such a keen sense of purpose, was only made possible by crucial developments that occurred

over the past decade in that aspect of Bahá'í culture which pertains to deepening.

When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá'í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.

To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain

an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.

1.10 Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. Passivity is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement.

1.11 What is imperative is that the quality of the educational process fostered at the level of the study circle rise markedly over the next year so that the potential of local populations to create such dynamics is realized. Much will fall on those who serve as tutors in this respect. Theirs will be the challenge to provide the environment that is envisioned in the institute courses, an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation. Failing this, no matter how many study circles are formed in a cluster, the force necessary to propel change will not be generated.

1.12 If the work of the tutor is to reach higher and higher degrees of excellence, it must be remembered that primary responsibility for the development of human resources in a region or country rests with the training institute. While striving to increase the number of its participants, the institute as a structure—from the board, to the coordinators at different levels, to the tutors at the grassroots—must lay equal stress on the effectiveness of the system in its entirety, for, in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress. At the level of the cluster, the coordinator must bring both practical experience and dynamism to his or her efforts to accompany those who serve as tutors. He or she should arrange periodic gatherings for them to reflect on their endeavors. Events organized to repeat the study of segments selected from the institute material may occasionally prove helpful, provided they do not inculcate a need for perpetual training. The capabilities of a tutor develop progressively as an individual enters the field of action and assists others in contributing to the aim of the present series of global Plans, through study of the

sequence of courses and implementation of their practical component. And as men and women of various ages move along the sequence and complete their study of each course with the help of tutors, others must stand ready to accompany them in acts of service undertaken according to their strengths and interests—particularly the coordinators responsible for children’s classes, for junior youth groups and for study circles, acts of service crucial to the perpetuation of the system itself. To ensure that the proper measure of vitality is pulsating through this system should continue to be the object of intense learning in every country over the course of the next twelve months.

1.13 Concern for the spiritual education of children has long been an element of the culture of the Bahá’í community, a concern that resulted in two, coexisting realities. One, emulating the achievements of the Bahá’ís of Iran, was characterized by the capacity to offer systematic classes, from grade to grade, to children from Bahá’í families, generally with the aim of imparting basic knowledge of the history and teachings of the Faith to rising generations. In most parts of the world, the number who benefited from such classes has been relatively small. The other reality emerged in areas where large-scale enrollments took place, both rural and urban. A more inclusive attitude dominated that experience. Yet while children from households of all kinds were at once eager and welcome to attend Bahá’í classes, various factors prevented lessons from being conducted with the required degree of regularity, year after year. How pleased we are to see this duality, a consequence of historical circumstances, begin to fall away as friends trained by institutes everywhere strive to offer classes, open to all, on a systematic basis.

Such promising beginnings have now to be vigorously pursued. In every cluster with an intensive program of growth in operation, efforts need to be made to systematize further the provision of spiritual education to increasing numbers of children, from families of many backgrounds—a requisite of the community-building process gathering momentum in neighborhoods and villages. This will be a demanding task, one that calls for patience and cooperation on the part of parents and institutions alike. The Ruhi Institute has already been requested to expedite plans to complete its courses for training children’s class teachers at different levels including the corresponding lessons, starting with youngsters aged 5 or 6 and proceeding to those aged 10 or 11, in order to close the present gap between existing lessons and its textbooks for junior youth, such as *Spirit of Faith* and the forthcoming *Power of the Holy Spirit*, which provide a distinctly Bahá’í component to the program for that age group. As these additional courses and lessons become available, institutes in every country will be able to prepare the teachers and the coordinators required to put in place, grade by grade, the core of a program for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements can be organized. Meanwhile, institutes should do their best to provide teachers with suitable materials, from among others currently in existence, for use in their classes with children of various ages, as necessary.

1.15 The International Teaching Center has earned our abiding gratitude for the vital impetus it lent to the efforts to secure the early attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan. To see the degree of energy it brought to this worldwide enterprise, following so tenaciously the progress in every continent and collaborating so closely with the Continental Counsellors, was to catch

a glimpse of the tremendous power inherent in the Administrative Order. As the Teaching Center now turns its attention with equal vigor to questions related to the efficacy of activities at the cluster level, it will no doubt give special consideration to the implementation of Bahá'í children's classes. We are confident that its analysis of the experience gained in a few selected clusters this coming year, representative of diverse social realities, will shed light on practical issues which will make possible the establishment of regular classes, for children of every age, in neighborhoods and villages.

1.16 The rapid spread of the program for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth is yet another expression of cultural advance in the Bahá'í community. While global trends project an image of this age group as problematic, lost in the throes of tumultuous physical and emotional change, unresponsive and self-consumed, the Bahá'í community—in the language it employs and the approaches it adopts—is moving decidedly in the opposite direction, seeing in junior youth instead altruism, an acute sense of justice, eagerness to learn about the universe and a desire to contribute to the construction of a better world. Account after account, in which junior youth in countries all over the planet give voice to their thoughts as participants in the program, testifies to the validity of this vision. There is every indication that the program engages their expanding consciousness in an exploration of reality that helps them to analyze the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and to recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions, sharpening their spiritual perception, enhancing their powers of expression and reinforcing moral structures that will serve them throughout their lives. At an age when burgeoning intellectual, spiritual and physical powers become accessible to them, they are being given the tools needed to combat

the forces that would rob them of their true identity as noble beings and to work for the common good.

1.17 That the major component of the program explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in the mode of religious instruction, has opened the way for its extension to junior youth in a variety of settings and circumstances. In many such instances, then, those who implement the program enter confidently into the area of social action, encountering a range of questions and possibilities, which are being followed and organized in a global process of learning by the Office of Social and Economic Development in the Holy Land. Already the accumulating body of knowledge and experience has given rise to the capacity in several clusters scattered across the globe to each sustain over one thousand junior youth in the program. To help others advance swiftly in this direction, the Office is establishing a network of sites in all continents, with the assistance of a corps of believers, that can be used to provide training to coordinators from scores upon scores of clusters. These resource persons continue to support coordinators upon their return to their respective clusters, enabling them to create a spiritually charged environment in which the junior youth program can take root.

1.18 Further knowledge is sure to accrue in this area of endeavor, although a pattern of action is already clear. Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community limits the extent of its response to the demand for the program by schools and civic groups. Within the clusters that today are the focus of an intensive program of growth, there is a wide array of circumstances, from those with a few sporadic junior youth groups to those maintaining a number sufficient to require the services of a dedicated coordinator, who could receive ongoing support from a site for the dissemination of learning. To ensure that this

capacity increases across the entire spectrum of these clusters, we are calling for 32 learning sites, each serving some twenty clusters with full-time coordinators, to be in operation by the end of the current Plan. In all other such clusters, priority should be given to creating the capacity over the coming year to offer the program, multiplying the number of groups systematically.

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1.19 The developments we have mentioned thus far—the rise in capacity to teach the Faith directly and to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life, the efflorescence of an approach to study of the writings that is wedded to action, the renewal of commitment to provide spiritual education to the young in neighborhoods and villages on a regular basis, and the spread in influence of a program that instills in junior youth the sense of a twofold moral purpose, to develop their inherent potentialities and to contribute to the transformation of society—are all reinforced, in no small measure, by yet another advance at the level of culture, the implications of which are far-reaching indeed. This evolution in collective consciousness is discernable in the growing frequency with which the word “accompany” appears in conversations among the friends, a word that is being endowed with new meaning as it is integrated into the common vocabulary of the Bahá’í community. It signals the significant strengthening of a culture in which learning is the mode of operation, a mode that fosters the informed participation of more and more people in a united effort to apply Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to the construction of a divine civilization, which the Guardian states is the primary mission of the Faith. Such an approach offers a striking contrast to the spiritually bankrupt and moribund ways of an old social

order that so often seeks to harness human energy through domination, through greed, through guilt or through manipulation.

In relationships among the friends, then, this development in culture finds expression in the quality of their interactions. Learning as a mode of operation requires that all assume a posture of humility, a condition in which one becomes forgetful of self, placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance, knowing that He, and He alone, can change the gnat into an eagle, the drop into a boundless sea. And in such a state souls labor together ceaselessly, delighting not so much in their own accomplishments but in the progress and services of others. So it is that their thoughts are centered at all times on helping one another scale the heights of service to His Cause and soar in the heaven of His knowledge. This is what we see in the present pattern of activity unfolding across the globe, propagated by young and old, by veteran and newly enrolled, working side by side. 1.20

Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community’s mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and 1.21

to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

1.22 That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not.

It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfill these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itsself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.

The development that we are sure to witness in Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyze the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical, fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.

1.23

Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant

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advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Center of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programs of growth.

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1.25 Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. "Is not the object of every Revelation", He Himself proclaims, "to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavor to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas.

Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.

In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning.

1.27 In our Riḍván 2008 message we indicated that, as the friends continued to labor at the level of the cluster, they would find themselves drawn further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavors. A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase. At this crucial point in the unfoldment of the Plan, when so many clusters are nearing such a stage, it seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.

1.28 Over the decades, the Bahá'í community has gained much experience in these two areas of endeavor. There are, of course, a great many Bahá'ís who are engaged as individuals in social action and public discourse through their occupations. A number of non-governmental organizations, inspired by the teachings of the Faith and operating at the regional and national levels,

are working in the field of social and economic development for the betterment of their people. Agencies of National Spiritual Assemblies are contributing through various avenues to the promotion of ideas conducive to public welfare. At the international level, agencies such as the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community are performing a similar function. To the extent necessary and desirable, the friends working at the grassroots of the community will draw on this experience and capacity as they strive to address the concerns of the society around them.

Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum, social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programs of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations. Irrespective of its scope and scale, all social action seeks to apply the teachings and principles of the Faith to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly. Such endeavors are distinguished, then, by their stated purpose to promote the material well-being of the population, in addition to its spiritual welfare. That the world civilization now on humanity's horizon must achieve a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life is central to the Bahá'í teachings. Clearly this ideal has profound implications for the nature of any social action pursued by Bahá'ís, whatever its scope and range of influence. Though conditions will vary from country to country, and perhaps from cluster to cluster, eliciting from the friends a variety of endeavors, there are certain fundamental concepts that all should bear in mind. One is the centrality of knowledge to social existence. The perpetuation of ignorance is a most grievous form of oppression;

it reinforces the many walls of prejudice that stand as barriers to the realization of the oneness of humankind, at once the goal and operating principle of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. Access to knowledge is the right of every human being, and participation in its generation, application and diffusion a responsibility that all must shoulder in the great enterprise of building a prosperous world civilization—each individual according to his or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation. Thus, while social action may involve the provision of goods and services in some form, its primary concern must be to build capacity within a given population to participate in creating a better world. Social change is not a project that one group of people carries out for the benefit of another. The scope and complexity of social action must be commensurate with the human resources available in a village or neighborhood to carry it forward. Efforts best begin, then, on a modest scale and grow organically as capacity within the population develops. Capacity rises to new levels, of course, as the protagonists of social change learn to apply with increasing effectiveness elements of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, together with the contents and methods of science, to their social reality. This reality they must strive to read in a manner consistent with His teachings—seeing in their fellow human beings gems of inestimable value and recognizing the effects of the dual process of integration and disintegration on both hearts and minds, as well as on social structures.

1.30 Effective social action serves to enrich participation in the discourses of society, just as the insights gained from engaging in certain discourses can help to clarify the concepts that shape social action. At the level of the cluster, involvement in public discourse can range from an act as simple as introducing Bahá'í ideas into everyday conversation to more formal activities such

as the preparation of articles and attendance at gatherings, dedicated to themes of social concern—climate change and the environment, governance and human rights, to mention a few. It entails, as well, meaningful interactions with civic groups and local organizations in villages and neighborhoods.

In this connection, we feel compelled to raise a warning: It will be important for all to recognize that the value of engaging in social action and public discourse is not to be judged by the ability to bring enrollments. Though endeavors in these two areas of activity may well effect an increase in the size of the Bahá'í community, they are not undertaken for this purpose. Sincerity in this respect is an imperative. Moreover, care should be exercised to avoid overstating the Bahá'í experience or drawing undue attention to fledgling efforts, such as the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, which are best left to mature at their own pace. The watchword in all cases is humility. While conveying enthusiasm about their beliefs, the friends should guard against projecting an air of triumphalism, hardly appropriate among themselves, much less in other circumstances. 1.31

In describing for you these new opportunities now opening at the level of the cluster, we are not asking you to alter in any way your current course. Nor should it be imagined that such opportunities represent an alternative arena of service, competing with the expansion and consolidation work for the community's limited resources and energies. Over the coming year, the institute process and the pattern of activity that it engenders should continue to be strengthened, and teaching should remain uppermost in the mind of every believer. Further involvement in the life of society should not be sought prematurely. It will proceed 1.32

naturally as the friends in every cluster persevere in applying the provisions of the Plan through a process of action, reflection, consultation and study, and learn as a result. Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning.

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1.33 Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one family. "See ye no strangers," is His exhortation; "rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness." All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of suffering out of His love for humanity? Look within your own ranks, at your dear Bahá'í brothers and sisters in Iran. Do they not exemplify fortitude born of

the love of God and the desire to serve Him? Does not their capacity to transcend the cruelest and most bitter persecution bespeak the capacity of millions upon millions of oppressed people of the world to arise and take a decisive part in building the Kingdom of God on earth? Undeterred by divisive social constructs, press on and bring Bahá'u'lláh's message to waiting souls in every urban neighborhood, in every rural hamlet, in every corner of the globe, drawing them to His community, the community of the Greatest Name. Never do you leave our thoughts and prayers, and we will continue to implore the Almighty to reinforce you with His wondrous grace.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

29 August 2010

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure one hundred years ago from Haifa for Port Said signaled the opening of a glorious new chapter in the annals of the Faith. He was not to return to the Holy Land for three years. Referring to that historic moment the Guardian would later write: "The establishment of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the Western Hemisphere—the most outstanding achievement that will forever be associated with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry—had ... set in motion such tremendous forces, and been productive of such far-reaching results, as to warrant the active and personal participation of the Center of the Covenant Himself...." With the inauguration of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels to the West, the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, hemmed in for more than half a century by the hosts of enmity and oppression, burst its restraints. For the first time since its inception, the recognized Head of the Faith enjoyed a freedom of action to pursue unencumbered its divinely prescribed mission. 2.1

By any earthly measure, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would have seemed ill prepared to carry out the task before Him. He was sixty-six years old, an exile since childhood, with no formal schooling, a prisoner for forty years, in failing health, and unfamiliar with Western customs and languages. Yet He arose, without thought of comfort, undeterred by the risks involved, and utterly reliant upon divine assistance, to champion the Cause of God. He interacted with diverse peoples in nine countries on 2.2

three continents. The scope and intensity of His tireless exertions were such as to “dumbfound His followers in East and West with admiration and wonder” and to “exercise an imperishable influence” on the course of the Faith’s future.

2.3 Over the next few years, Bahá’ís around the world will joyously call to mind the many episodes associated with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s historic journey. But this anniversary is more than a time for commemoration. The words uttered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse. We should, therefore, reflect not only upon what the Master achieved and set in motion but also on the work that remains undone to which He has summoned us. In the Tablets of the Divine Plan, He expressed His inmost longing:

2.4 O that I could travel, even though on foot and in the utmost poverty, to these regions, and, raising the call of “Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá” in cities, villages, mountains, deserts and oceans, promote the divine teachings! This, alas, I cannot do. How intensely I deplore it! Please God, ye may achieve it.

2.5 Nearly a century has passed since these words were recorded. Stage after stage of the Divine Plan has been successfully prosecuted. The Faith has been established in all corners of the world. We are present in those places that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá yearned to visit. Individuals,

communities, and institutions are now endowed with the capacity necessary for systematic, sustained, and coherent action. During this precious period of remembrance, then, let each and every one of His faithful lovers arise and act in His Name. Let them offer their share, no matter how humble, to the progress of the Plan He authored—that priceless and everlasting bequest.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

28 December 2010

To the Conference of the
Continental Boards of Counsellors

Dearly loved Friends,

Fifteen years have elapsed since, on an occasion such as this, we gave to the body of Counsellors assembled in the Holy Land the first intimation of the course the Bahá'í community would have to take, if it was to accelerate the dual process of its expansion and consolidation—a course which its accumulated experience had prepared it to steer with confidence. No need to remark on the distance traversed in a short decade and a half. The record of accomplishments speaks for itself. Today we invite you to begin deliberations on the next stage of the great enterprise on which the Bahá'í world is embarked, a stage that will stretch from Riḍván 2011 to Riḍván 2016, constituting the first of two consecutive Five Year Plans that will culminate at the centenary of the inauguration of the Faith's Formative Age. Over the coming days you are asked to formulate a clear conception of how the Counsellors and their auxiliaries will assist the community in building on its extraordinary achievements—extending to other spheres of operation the mode of learning which has so undeniably come to characterize its teaching endeavors, gaining the capacity needed to employ with a high degree of coherence the instruments and methods which it has so painstakingly developed, and increasing well beyond all previous numbers the ranks of those who, alive to the vision of the Faith, are laboring so assiduously in pursuit of its God-given mission. 3.1

3.2 In our Riḍván message this year, we described the dynamics of the process of learning that, through four successive global Plans, has steadily gathered momentum, enhancing the capacity of the friends to engage in grassroots action. The vista from this vantage point is stupendous indeed. With more than 350,000 souls worldwide who have completed the first institute course, capacity to shape a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character has risen perceptibly. In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends. A near doubling in the reserve of Bahá'í children's class teachers in a five-year period, bringing the total to some 130,000, has made it possible for the community to respond wholeheartedly to the spiritual aspirations of the young. A six fold increase in capacity over the same period to assist junior youth in navigating through such a crucial stage of their lives provides an indication of the level of commitment to that age group. What is more, everywhere, a notable number of friends find themselves ready to enter into conversation with people of varied backgrounds and interests and to undertake with them an exploration of reality that gives rise to a shared understanding of the exigencies of this period in human history and the means for addressing them. And fuelling the systematic multiplication of core activities across the globe, with no fewer than half a million known participants at a given time, are the efforts of close to 70,000 friends capable of serving as tutors of study circles.

3.3 As made clear in our Riḍván message, in the system thus created to develop its human resources, the community of the Greatest Name possesses an instrument

of limitless potentialities. Under a wide diversity of conditions, in virtually any cluster, it is possible for an expanding nucleus of individuals to generate a movement towards the goal of a new World Order. A decade ago, when we introduced the concept of a cluster—a geographic construct intended to facilitate thinking about the growth of the Faith—we provided an outline of four broad stages along the path of its development. As the Bahá'í community set about implementing the provisions of the Plan, this outline proved immensely useful in giving shape and definition to what is essentially an ongoing process. The abundant experience which has since accrued enables the believers now to conceive of the movement of a population, propelled by mounting spiritual forces, in terms of a rich and dynamic continuum. A brief review of the process that unfolds in a cluster, though well familiar to you all, will serve to underscore its fundamentally organic nature.

A program of growth

Invariably, opportunities afforded by the personal circumstances of the believers initially involved—or perhaps a single home front pioneer—to enter into meaningful and distinctive conversation with local residents dictate how the process of growth begins in a cluster. A study circle made up of a few friends or colleagues, a class offered for several neighborhood children, a group formed for junior youth during after-school hours, a devotional gathering hosted for family and friends—any one of these can serve as a stimulus to growth. What happens next follows no predetermined course. Conditions may justify that one core activity be given precedence, multiplying at a rate faster than the others. It is equally possible that all four would advance at a comparable pace. Visiting teams may be

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called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities. But irrespective of the specifics, the outcome must be the same. Within every cluster, the level of cohesion achieved among the core activities must be such that, in their totality, a nascent program for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived. That is to say, in whatever combination and however small in number, devotional gatherings, children's classes and junior youth groups are being maintained by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster. This initial flow of human resources into the field of systematic action marks the first of several milestones in a process of sustainable growth.

3.5 All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands—but none more so than the Auxiliary Board members. To help the friends visualize this first important milestone, and the multiplicity of ways in which it can be reached, is central to the functioning of every Auxiliary Board member and an increasing number of his or her assistants. In this, as in all their work, they must display breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness. They should stand shoulder to shoulder with the friends, supporting them through their struggles and partaking in their joys. Some of these friends will quickly move to the forefront of activity, while others will step forward more tentatively; yet all require support and encouragement, offered not in the abstract but on the basis of that intimate knowledge which is only acquired by working side by side in the field of service. Faith in the capacity of every individual who shows a desire to serve will prove essential to the efforts of those who are

to elicit from the believers wholehearted participation in the Plan. Unqualified love free of paternalism will be indispensable if they are to help turn hesitation into courage born of trust in God and transform a yearning for excitement into a commitment to long-term action. Calm determination will be vital as they strive to demonstrate how stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress. And a readiness to listen, with heightened spiritual perception, will be invaluable in identifying obstacles that may prevent some of the friends from appreciating the imperative of unified action.

Increasing intensity

3.6 It is important to note that, as a program of growth is being brought into existence, an emergent community spirit begins to exert its influence on the course of events. Whether activities are scattered across the cluster or concentrated in one village or neighborhood, a sense of common purpose characterizes the endeavors of the friends. Whatever level of organization served to channel the early manifestations of this spirit, the systematic, coordinated multiplication of core activities necessitates that higher levels soon be attained. Through various measures, greater structure is lent to activity, and initiative, shaped largely by individual volition before, is now given collective expression. A complement of coordinators appointed by the institute moves into place—those for study circles, for junior youth groups, and for children's classes. Any order of appointment is potentially valid. Nothing less than an acute awareness of circumstances on the ground should make this determination, for what is at stake is not compliance with a set of procedures but the unfolding of an educational process that has begun to show

its potential to bring about the spiritual empowerment of large numbers.

3.7 Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process, other administrative structures are gradually taking shape. Out of the occasional meetings of a few believers emerge the regular deliberations of an expanding core group of friends concerned with channeling into the field of service an increasing store of energy. As the process of growth continues to gather momentum, such an arrangement ultimately fails to satisfy the demands of planning and decision making, and an Area Teaching Committee is constituted, and reflection meetings institutionalized. In the joint interactions of the Committee, the institute and the Auxiliary Board members, a fully fledged scheme for the coordination of activities becomes operational—with all the inherent capacity needed to facilitate the efficient flow of guidance, funds, and information. By now, the process of growth in the cluster will conform to the rhythm established by pronounced cycles of expansion and consolidation, which, punctuated every three months by a meeting for reflection and planning, are unfolding without interruption.

3.8 Here again, it is for the Auxiliary Board members and other relevant institutions and agencies, such as the Regional Council and institute board, to ensure that administrative structures being forged in the cluster take on the requisite characteristics. Specifically, the sequence of courses that we have recommended for use by institutes everywhere, which is facilitating so effectively the process of transformation under way, is designed to create an environment conducive at once to universal participation and to mutual support and assistance. The nature of relationships among individuals in this environment, all of whom consider

themselves as treading a common path of service, was explained briefly in our Riḍván message. We also indicated there that such an environment is not without its effects on the administrative affairs of the Faith. As an increasing number of believers participate in the teaching and administrative work, undertaken with a humble attitude of learning, they should come to view every task, every interaction, as an occasion to join hands in the pursuit of progress and to accompany one another in their efforts to serve the Cause. In this way will the impulse to over instruct be quieted. In this way will the tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction by manual, be averted. Discrete actions are placed in context, and even the smallest of steps is endowed with meaning. The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced.

3.9 Within this landscape of unfolding processes, emerging structures, and enduring fellowship, that moment which has come to be known as the “launching” of an intensive program of growth represents conscious recognition that all the elements necessary to accelerate the expansion and consolidation of the Faith are not only in place but also functioning with an adequate degree of effectiveness. It signals the maturation of an ever-expanding, self-sustaining system for the spiritual edification of a population: a steady stream of friends is proceeding through the courses of the training institute and engaging in the corresponding activities, which serves, in turn, to increase the number of fresh recruits into the Faith, a significant percentage of whom invariably enters the institute process, guaranteeing the expansion of the system. This constitutes another

milestone that the friends laboring in every cluster must, in time, reach.

3.10 In reiterating here much of what we have stated on previous occasions, we hope to have impressed upon you how readily the movement of a population, inspired by the purpose and principles of the Cause, can be nurtured, when not made the object of extraneous complications. We have no illusion that the path traced out so summarily above is devoid of difficulty. Progress is achieved through the dialectic of crisis and victory, and setbacks are inevitable. A drop in participation, a disruption in the cycles of activity, a momentary breach in the bonds of unity—these are among the myriad challenges that may have to be met. Not infrequently the rise in human resources, or the ability to mobilize them, will fall short of the demands of rapid expansion. Yet the imposition of formulas on the process will not result in a pattern of growth characterized by the desired equilibrium. Temporary imbalances in the progress of different activities are intrinsic to the process, and they can be adjusted over time, if dealt with patiently. Scaling back one activity that is flourishing, on the basis of theoretical conceptions of how balanced growth can be achieved, often proves counterproductive. While the friends in a cluster might well benefit from the experience of those who have already established the necessary pattern of action, it is only through continued action, reflection and consultation on their part that they will learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come.

3.11 Today, there are some 1,600 clusters worldwide where the friends have succeeded in creating the pattern of action associated with an intensive program of

growth. Though significant, this accomplishment can by no means be considered the culmination of the process that has gathered momentum in each cluster. New frontiers of learning are now open to the friends, who are asked to dedicate their energies to the creation of vibrant communities, growing in size and reflecting in greater and greater degrees Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity. Such clusters will also need to serve as reservoirs of potential pioneers that can be dispatched, largely across the home front, to cluster after cluster, shedding in some the first rays of the light of His Revelation and strengthening in others the presence of the Faith, enabling all to progress quickly to the first milestone along the path of development, or beyond. With this in mind, we will call upon the community of the Most Great Name at Riḍván 2011 to raise over the next five years the total number of clusters in which a program of growth is under way, at whatever level of intensity, to 5,000, approximately one third of all clusters in the world at present.

Advancing the frontiers of learning

What we have described in the preceding paragraphs and in so many messages over the last decade and a half can best be viewed as the latest in a series of approaches to the growth of the Bahá'í community, each suited to specific historical circumstances. This divinely propelled process of growth was set in motion by the fervor generated in the Cradle of the Faith more than one hundred and sixty years ago, as thousands responded to the summons of a New Day, and received impetus through the exertions made by early believers to carry the message of Bahá'u'lláh to neighboring countries in the East and scattered pockets in the West. It acquired greater structure through the Tablets of

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the Divine Plan revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and gained momentum as the friends spread out systematically across the globe under the direction of the Guardian to establish small centers of Bahá’í activity and erect the first pillars of the Administrative Order. It gathered force in the rural areas of the world as masses of humanity were moved to embrace the Faith, but slowed considerably as the friends strove to discover strategies for sustaining large-scale expansion and consolidation. And, for fifteen years now, it has been steadily accelerating since we raised the call at the outset of the Four Year Plan for the Bahá’í world to systematize the teaching work on the basis of the experience it had gained through decades of difficult but invaluable learning. That the current approach to growth, effective as it is, must evolve still further in complexity and sophistication once it has taken root in a cluster, demonstrating ever more notably the “society-building power” inherent in the Faith, few would fail to recognize.

3.13 Referring to the development of the global Bahá’í community, how often did the beloved Guardian encourage the friends to remain resolute in their purpose and persevere in their endeavors. “Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses,” he noted with satisfaction, “they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá’u’lláh can mature and develop.” “It is this building process, slow and unobtrusive,” he reminded them, that “constitutes the one hope” of a disillusioned humanity. That this process will continue to gain in scope and influence and the Administrative Order demonstrate in time “its capacity to be regarded not only as the nucleus but the very pattern of the New World Order” is clear from his writings. “In a world the

structure of whose political and social institutions is impaired, whose vision is befogged, whose conscience is bewildered, whose religious systems have become anemic and lost their virtue,” he asserted so emphatically, “this healing Agency, this leavening Power, this cementing Force, intensely alive and all-pervasive,” is “taking shape,” is “crystallizing into institutions,” and is “mobilizing its forces”.

3.14 What should be apparent is that, if the Administrative Order is to serve as a pattern for future society, then the community within which it is developing must not only acquire capacity to address increasingly complex material and spiritual requirements but also become larger and larger in size. How could it be otherwise. A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. That the worldwide Bahá’í community has managed to avert the dangers of complacency is a source of abiding joy to us. Indeed, the community has well in hand its expansion and consolidation. Yet, to administer the affairs of teeming numbers in villages and cities around the globe—to raise aloft the standard of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order for all to see—is still a distant goal.

3.15 Therein, then, lies the challenge that must be faced by those in the forefront of the learning process which will continue to advance over the course of the next Plan. Wherever an intensive program of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure

that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people. Let them not lose sight of the remarkable receptivity they found—nay, the sense of eager expectation that awaited them—as they gained confidence in their ability to interact with people of all walks of life and converse with them about the Person of Bahá’u’lláh and His Revelation. Let them hold fast to the conviction that a direct presentation of the Faith, when carried out at a sufficient level of depth and reinforced by a sound approach to consolidation, can bring enduring results. And let them not forget the lessons of the past which left no doubt that a relatively small band of active supporters of the Cause, no matter how resourceful, no matter how consecrated, cannot attend to the needs of communities comprising hundreds, much less thousands, of men, women and children. The implications are clear enough. If, in a cluster, those shouldering responsibility for expansion and consolidation number in the tens, with a few hundred participating in the activities of community life, both figures should rise significantly so that by the end of the Plan, one or two hundred are facilitating the participation of one or two thousand.

3.16 It is heartening to see that, already in some 300 of the 1,600 clusters worldwide with intensive programs of growth in operation, the believers have entered the new arena of learning now open to them, and, in more than a few, they are extending its frontiers. Clearly, in all such clusters, strengthening the educational processes set in motion by the training institute, each with its own requisites—regularly held classes for the youngest members of society, close-knit groups for junior youth, and circles of study for youth and adults—is of paramount importance. Much of what this work entails was discussed in the Riḍván message. Without

exception, having witnessed the transformative effects of the institute process first hand, the friends in such clusters are striving to gain a fuller appreciation of the dynamics that underlie it—the spirit of fellowship it creates, the participatory approach it adopts, the depth of understanding it fosters, the acts of service it recommends, and, above all, its reliance on the Word of God. Every effort is being exerted to ensure that the process reflects the complementarity of “being” and “doing” the institute courses make explicit; the centrality they accord to knowledge and its application; the emphasis they place on avoiding false dichotomies; the stress they lay on memorization of the Creative Word; and the care they exercise in raising consciousness, without awakening the insistent self.

Enhancing administrative capacity

Though the central elements of the process of growth remain unchanged in the clusters in the vanguard of learning, sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity. Different innovations have already been introduced, on the basis of both geographic considerations and numerical growth. The division of the cluster into smaller units, the decentralization of the reflection meeting, the assignment of assistants to institute coordinators, the deployment in teams of experienced friends to support others in the field—these are some of the arrangements that have been made thus far. We have every confidence that, with your able assistance, the International Teaching Center will follow these developments over the course of the next Plan, helping to consolidate the lessons learned into well-proven methods and instruments. To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends

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to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress.

3.18 Whatever the nature of the arrangements made at the cluster level for coordinating large-scale activity, continued progress will depend on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies and on the increased capacity of Regional Bahá'í Councils and ultimately National Spiritual Assemblies. In the Riḍván message we expressed pleasure at noting the growing strength of National Assemblies, and we look to the coming five years with optimism, certain that we will see significant leaps forward in this respect. Moreover, we have no doubt that, in concert with National Assemblies, you will be able to help Regional Councils enhance their institutional capacity. There are currently 170 such administrative bodies in 45 countries worldwide, and their number is sure to climb during the next Plan. It will be imperative that all Regional Councils pay close attention to the operation of the training institute and the functioning of Area Teaching Committees. With this in mind, they will find it necessary to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it. These will include a well-functioning regional office that provides the secretary with basic organizational support; a sound system of accounting that accommodates diverse channels for the flow of funds to and from clusters; an efficient means of communication that takes into consideration the reality of life in villages and neighborhoods; and, where warranted, physical structures that facilitate intensified and focused activity. What is important to acknowledge in this respect is that only if the Councils themselves are

engaged in a process of learning will such mechanisms prove to be effective. Otherwise, while ostensibly created to support learning in action by an increasing number of participants in neighborhoods and villages, systems being developed may well work against it in subtle ways, stifling, unintentionally, rising aspirations at the grassroots.

3.19 While collaboration with National Spiritual Assemblies and Regional Councils will be one of your primary concerns, your auxiliaries will need to direct more and more of their energies towards fostering institutional capacity at the local level, where the demands of community building assert themselves so unmistakably. To help you envision what lies ahead of Auxiliary Board members and their assistants everywhere, particularly in clusters experiencing large-scale expansion and consolidation, we ask you to reflect, first, on the development of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many rural areas of the world, in which the vast majority of such clusters today are to be found.

3.20 As you are aware, often in a rural cluster made up of villages and perhaps one or two towns, while the pattern of action associated with an intensive program of growth is being established, the efforts of the friends are confined to a few localities. Once in place, however, the pattern can be extended quickly to village after village, as explained in our Riḍván message this year. Early on in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly comes into existence, and its steady development follows a trajectory parallel with, and intimately tied to, the fledgling process of growth unfolding in the village. And not unlike the evolution of other facets of this process, the development of the Local Assembly can best be understood in terms of capacity building.

What needs to occur in the first instance is relatively straightforward: Individual awareness of the process of growth gathering momentum in the village, born of each member's personal involvement in the core activities, must coalesce into a collective consciousness that recognizes both the nature of the transformation under way and the obligation of the Assembly to foster it. Without doubt, some attention will have to be given to certain basic administrative functions—for example, meeting with a degree of regularity, conducting the Nineteen Day Feast and planning Holy Day observances, establishing a local fund, and holding annual elections in accordance with Bahá'í principle. However, it should not prove difficult for the Local Assembly to begin, concomitant with such efforts and with encouragement from an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member, to consult as a body on one or two specific issues with immediate relevance to the life of the community: how the devotional character of the village is being enhanced through the efforts of individuals who have completed the first institute course; how the spiritual education of the children is being addressed by teachers raised up by the institute; how the potential of junior youth is being realized by the program for their spiritual empowerment; how the spiritual and social fabric of the community is being strengthened as the friends visit one another in their homes. As the Assembly consults on such tangible matters and learns to nurture the process of growth lovingly and patiently, its relationship with the Area Teaching Committee and the training institute gradually becomes cemented in a common purpose. But, of still greater importance, it will begin to lay the foundations on which can be built that uniquely affectionate and genuinely supportive relationship, described by the beloved Guardian in many of his messages, which Local Spiritual Assemblies should establish with the individual believer.

Clearly, learning to consult on specific issues related to the global Plan, no matter how crucial, represents but one dimension of the capacity-building process in which the Local Spiritual Assembly must engage. Its continued development implies adherence to the injunction laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "discussions must all be confined to spiritual matters that pertain to the training of souls, the instruction of children, the relief of the poor, the help of the feeble throughout all classes in the world, kindness to all peoples, the diffusion of the fragrances of God and the exaltation of His Holy Word." Its steady advancement requires an unbending commitment to promote the best interests of the community and a vigilance in guarding the process of growth against the forces of moral decay that threaten to arrest it. Its ongoing progress calls for a sense of responsibility that extends beyond the circle of friends and families engaged in the core activities to encompass the entire population of the village. And sustaining its gradual maturation is unshakable faith in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's assurance that He will enfold every Spiritual Assembly within the embrace of His care and protection.

Associated with this rise in collective consciousness is the Assembly's growing ability to properly assess and utilize resources, financial and otherwise, both in support of community activities and in discharging its administrative functions, which may in time include the judicious appointment of committees and the maintenance of modest physical facilities for its operations. No less vital is its ability to nurture an environment conducive to the participation of large numbers in unified action and to ensure that their energies and talents contribute towards progress. In all these respects, the spiritual well-being of the community remains uppermost in the Assembly's mind. And when inevitable

problems arise, whether in relation to some activity or among individuals, they will be addressed by a Local Spiritual Assembly which has so completely gained the confidence of the members of the community that all naturally turn to it for assistance. This implies that the Assembly has learned through experience how to help the believers put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, how to find the seeds of unity in even the most perplexing and thorny situations and how to nurture them slowly and lovingly, upholding at all times the standard of justice.

3.24 As the community grows in size and in capacity to maintain vitality, the friends will, we have indicated in the past, be drawn further into the life of society and be challenged to take advantage of the approaches they have developed to respond to a widening range of issues that face their village. The question of coherence, so essential to the growth achieved thus far, and so fundamental to the Plan's evolving framework for action, now assumes new dimensions. Much will fall on the Local Assembly, not as an executor of projects but as the voice of moral authority, to make certain that, as the friends strive to apply the teachings of the Faith to improve conditions through a process of action, reflection and consultation, the integrity of their endeavors is not compromised.

3.25 Our Riḍván message described a few of the characteristics of social action at the grassroots, and the conditions it must meet. Efforts in a village will generally begin on a small scale, perhaps with the emergence of groups of friends, each concerned with a specific social or economic need it has identified and each pursuing a simple set of appropriate actions. Consultation at the Nineteen Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find

constructive expression. Whatever the nature of activities undertaken, the Local Assembly must be attentive to potential pitfalls and help the friends, if necessary, to steer past them—the allurements of overly ambitious projects that would consume energies and ultimately prove untenable, the temptation of financial grants that would necessitate a departure from Bahá'í principle, the promises of technologies deceptively packaged that would strip the village of its cultural heritage and lead to fragmentation and dissonance. Eventually the strength of the institute process in the village, and the enhanced capabilities it has fostered in individuals, may enable the friends to take advantage of methods and programs of proven effectiveness, which have been developed by one or another Bahá'í-inspired organization and which have been introduced into the cluster at the suggestion of, and with support from, our Office of Social and Economic Development. Moreover, the Assembly must learn to interact with social and political structures in the locality, gradually raising consciousness of the presence of the Faith and the influence it is exerting on the progress of the village.

What is outlined in the foregoing paragraphs represents only a few of the attributes which Local Spiritual Assemblies in the many villages of the world will gradually develop in serving the needs of communities that embrace larger and larger numbers. As they increasingly manifest their latent capacities and powers, their members will come to be seen by the inhabitants of each village as “the trusted ones of the Merciful among men”. Thus will these Assemblies become “shining lamps and heavenly gardens, from which the fragrances of holiness are diffused over all regions, and the lights of knowledge are shed abroad over all created things. From them the spirit of life streameth in every direction.”

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3.27 Such a lofty vision applies equally, of course, to all Local Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world. Even in a major metropolitan area, the nature of an Assembly's development is fundamentally the same as the one delineated above. Differences lie principally in size and diversity of the population. The first necessitates the division of the Assembly's area of jurisdiction into neighborhoods according to the exigencies of growth and the gradual introduction of mechanisms for administering the affairs of the Faith in each. The second requires the Assembly to become familiar with the myriad social spaces, beyond geographic ones, in which segments of the population come together and to offer them, to the extent possible, the wisdom enshrined in the teachings. Further, the institutional structures in an urban area—social, political, and cultural—with which the Assembly must learn to engage are much wider in range and larger in number.

Service on Bahá'í institutions

3.28 In setting out for you in these pages developments we are eager to see in the administrative work of the Faith during the next Five Year Plan, we are reminded of the repeated warnings raised by the Guardian in this regard. "Let us take heed lest in our great concern for the perfection of the administrative machinery of the Cause," he stated, "we lose sight of the Divine Purpose for which it has been created." The Bahá'í administrative machinery, he reiterated again and again, "is to be regarded as a means, and not an end in itself". It is intended, he made clear, "to serve a twofold purpose". On the one hand, "it should aim at a steady and gradual expansion" of the Cause "along lines that are at once broad, sound and universal." On the other, "it should ensure the internal consolidation of the work already achieved." And he went on to explain: "It should

both provide the impulse whereby the dynamic forces latent in the Faith can unfold, crystallize, and shape the lives and conduct of men, and serve as a medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities among the divers elements that constitute the Bahá'í community."

3.29 It is our earnest hope that, in your efforts over the next Plan to promote the sound and harmonious development of Bahá'í administration at all levels, from the local to the national, you will do your utmost to help the friends carry out their functions in the context of the organic process of growth gathering momentum across the globe. The realization of this hope will hinge, to a large extent, on the degree to which those who have been called upon to render such service—whether elected to a Spiritual Assembly or named to one of its agencies, whether designated an institute coordinator or appointed one of your deputies—recognize the great privilege that is theirs and understand the boundaries which this privilege establishes for them.

3.30 Service on the institutions and agencies of the Faith is indeed a tremendous privilege, but not one that is sought by the individual; it is a duty and responsibility to which he or she may be called at any given time. It is understandable, of course, that all those involved in Bahá'í administration would rightly feel they have been invested with a singular honor in forming part, in whatever way, of a structure designed to be a channel through which the spirit of the Cause flows. Yet they should not imagine that such service entitles them to operate on the periphery of the learning process that is everywhere gaining strength, exempt from its inherent requirements. Nor should it be supposed that membership on administrative bodies provides an opportunity to promote one's own understanding of what

is recorded in the Sacred Text and how the teachings should be applied, steering the community in whatever direction personal preferences dictate. Referring to members of Spiritual Assemblies, the Guardian wrote that they “must disregard utterly their own likes and dislikes, their personal interests and inclinations, and concentrate their minds upon those measures that will conduce to the welfare and happiness of the Bahá’í Community and promote the common weal.” Bahá’í institutions do exercise authority to guide the friends, and exert moral, spiritual and intellectual influence on the lives of individuals and communities. However, such functions are to be performed with the realization that an ethos of loving service pervades Bahá’í institutional identity. Qualifying authority and influence in this manner implies sacrifice on the part of those entrusted to administer the affairs of the Faith. Does not ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tell us that “when a lump of iron is cast into the forge, its ferrous qualities of blackness, coldness and solidity, which symbolize the attributes of the human world, are concealed and disappear, while the fire’s distinctive qualities of redness, heat and fluidity, which symbolize the virtues of the Kingdom, become visibly apparent in it.” As He averred, “ye must in this matter—that is, the serving of humankind—lay down your very lives, and as ye yield yourselves, rejoice.”

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3.31 Dearly loved friends: As you well know, we take great pleasure in witnessing how ably you and your auxiliaries, serving in the forefront of the teaching field, are carrying out your duties to nurture in every heart and soul the fire of the love of God, to promote learning, and to assist all in their endeavors to develop an upright and praiseworthy character. When the North American Bahá’í community embarked on its first

Seven Year Plan, in pursuit of the responsibilities with which it had been charged in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Guardian addressed to the friends in that land a letter of considerable length and great potency, dated 25 December 1938, subsequently published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Elaborating on the nature of the tasks at hand, the letter made reference to what the Guardian described as spiritual prerequisites for the success of all Bahá’í undertakings. Of these, three, he indicated, “stand out as preeminent and vital”: rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from prejudice. Given the conditions of the world today, you would do well to reflect on the implications of his observations for the global effort of the Bahá’í community to infuse cluster after cluster with the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation.

Referring to rectitude of conduct, Shoghi Effendi spoke of the “justice, equity, truthfulness, honesty, fair-mindedness, reliability, and trustworthiness” that must “distinguish every phase of the life of the Bahá’í community.” Though applicable to all its members, this requisite was directed principally, he underscored, to its “elected representatives, whether local, regional, or national,” whose sense of moral rectitude should stand in clear contrast to “the demoralizing influences which a corruption-ridden political life so strikingly manifests”. The Guardian called for “an abiding sense of undeviating justice” in a “strangely disordered world” and quoted extensively from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, setting the sights of the friends on the highest standards of honesty and trustworthiness. He appealed to the believers to exemplify rectitude of conduct in every aspect of their lives—in their business dealings, in their domestic lives, in all manner of employment, in every service they render to the Cause and to their people—and to observe its

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requirements in their uncompromising adherence to the laws and principles of the Faith. That political life everywhere has continued to deteriorate at an alarming rate in the intervening years, as the very conception of statesmanship has been drained of meaning, as policies have come to serve the economic interests of the few in the name of progress, as hypocrisy has been allowed to undermine the operation of social and economic structures, is evident. If indeed great effort was required for the friends to uphold the high standards of the Faith then, how much greater must be the exertion in a world that rewards dishonesty, that encourages corruption, and that treats truth as a negotiable commodity. Profound is the confusion that threatens the foundations of society, and unwavering must be the resolve of all those involved in Bahá'í activity, lest the slightest trace of self-interest becloud their judgment. Let the coordinators of every training institute, the members of every Area Teaching Committee, every Auxiliary Board member and every one of his or her assistants, and all members of every local, regional and national Bahá'í body, whether elected or appointed, appreciate the significance of the Guardian's plea to ponder in their hearts the implications of the moral rectitude which he described with such clarity. May their actions serve as a reminder to a beleaguered and weary humanity of its high destiny and its inherent nobility.

3.33 No less pertinent to the success of the Bahá'í enterprise today are the Guardian's forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, "with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness". He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied "by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters". We need not provide for you here

evidence of the influence that such a deficient code now exerts on humanity as a whole; even the remotest spots on the globe are captivated by its enticements. Yet we feel compelled to mention a few points related specifically to the theme of purity. The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. And in this the friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the present-day order" must "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." Throughout the world today, young people are among the most enthusiastic supporters of the Plan and the most ardent champions of the Cause; their numbers will, we are certain, increase from year to year. May every one of them come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.

The Guardian next addressed the subject of prejudice, stating patently that "any division or cleavage" in the ranks of the Faith "is alien to its very purpose, principles, and ideals." He made clear that the friends should manifest "complete freedom from prejudice in their dealings with peoples of a different race, class,

creed, or color.” He went on to discuss at length the specific question of racial prejudice, “the corrosion of which,” he indicated, had “bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society” and which, he asserted at the time, “should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá’í community at the present stage of its evolution.” Independent of the strengths and weaknesses of the measures taken by the American nation, and the Bahá’í community evolving within it, in addressing this particular challenge, the fact remains that prejudices of all kinds—of race, of class, of ethnicity, of gender, of religious belief—continue to hold a strong grip on humanity. While it is true that, at the level of public discourse, great strides have been taken in refuting the falsehoods that give rise to prejudice in whatever form, it still permeates the structures of society and is systematically impressed on the individual consciousness. It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized.

3.35 The educational process associated with the training institute is, of course, helping to foster the spiritual conditions to which the Guardian referred in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, along with the many others mentioned in the writings that must distinguish the life of the Bahá’í community—the spirit of unity that must animate the friends, the ties of love that must bind them,

the firmness in the Covenant that must sustain them, and the reliance and trust they must place on the power of divine assistance, to note but a few. That such essential attributes are developed in the context of building capacity for service, in an environment that cultivates systematic action, is particularly noteworthy. In promoting this environment, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants need to recognize the importance of two fundamental, interlocking precepts: On the one hand, the high standard of conduct inculcated by Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation can admit no compromise; it can, in no wise, be lowered, and all must fix their gaze on its lofty heights. On the other, it must be acknowledged that, as human beings, we are far from perfect; what is expected of everyone is sincere daily effort. Self-righteousness is to be eschewed.

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Apart from the spiritual requisites of a sanctified Bahá’í life, there are habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan, and their development has to be encouraged at the level of culture. There are tendencies, as well, that need to be gradually overcome. Many of these tendencies are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large, which, not altogether unreasonably, enter into Bahá’í activity. The magnitude of the challenge facing the friends in this respect is not lost on us. They are called upon to become increasingly involved in the life of society, benefiting from its educational programs, excelling in its trades and professions, learning to employ well its tools, and applying themselves to the advancement of its arts and sciences. At the same time, they are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith to effect a transformation of society, remolding its institutions and processes, on a scale never before witnessed. To this end, they must remain acutely aware

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of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing—this, without feeling the least degree of superiority, without assuming an air of secrecy or aloofness, and without adopting an unnecessarily critical stance towards society. There are a few specific points we wish to mention in this connection.

3.37 It is heartening to note that the friends are approaching the study of the messages of the Universal House of Justice related to the Plan with such diligence. The level of discussion generated as they strive to put into practice the guidance received, and to learn from experience, is impressive. We cannot help noticing, however, that achievements tend to be more enduring in those regions where the friends strive to understand the totality of the vision conveyed in the messages, while difficulties often arise when phrases and sentences are taken out of context and viewed as isolated fragments. The institutions and agencies of the Faith should help the believers to analyze but not reduce, to ponder meaning but not dwell on words, to identify distinct areas of action but not compartmentalize. We realize that this is no small task. Society speaks more and more in slogans. We hope that the habits the friends are forming in study circles to work with full and complex thoughts and to achieve understanding will be extended to various spheres of activity.

3.38 Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: "We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in

between, there are links uniting the two." How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown. Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of Bahá'í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a program of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community.

3.39 Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort. The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project

with a clear beginning and a definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit.

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To understand the nature of the interacting processes that, in their totality, engender the expansion and consolidation of the Faith is vital to the successful execution of the Plan. In your efforts to further such understanding, you and your auxiliaries are encouraged to bear in mind a concept that lies at the foundation of the current global enterprise and, indeed, at the very heart of every stage of the Divine Plan, namely, that progress is achieved through the development of three participants—the individual, the institutions, and the community. Throughout human history, interactions among these three have been fraught with difficulties at every turn, with the individual clamoring for freedom, the institution demanding submission, and the community claiming precedence. Every society has defined, in one way or another, the relationships that bind the three, giving rise to periods of stability, interwoven with turmoil. Today, in this age of transition, as humanity struggles to attain its collective maturity, such relationships—nay, the very conception of the individual, of social institutions, and of the community—continue to be assailed by crises too numerous to count. The worldwide crisis of authority provides proof enough. So grievous have been its abuses, and so deep the suspicion and resentment it now arouses, that the world is becoming increasingly ungovernable—a situation made all the more perilous by the weakening of community ties.

Every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well that the purpose of His Revelation is to bring into being a new creation. No sooner had “the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.” The individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists in the Divine Plan—are being shaped under the direct influence of His Revelation, and a new conception of each, appropriate for a humanity that has come of age, is emerging. The relationships that bind them, too, are undergoing a profound transformation, bringing into the realm of existence civilization-building powers which can only be released through conformity with His decree. At a fundamental level these relationships are characterized by cooperation and reciprocity, manifestations of the interconnectedness that governs the universe. So it is that the individual, with no regard for “personal benefits and selfish advantages,” comes to see him- or herself as “one of the servants of God, the All-Possessing,” whose only desire is to carry out His laws. So it is that the friends come to recognize that “wealth of sentiment, abundance of good-will and effort” are of little avail when their flow is not directed along proper channels, that “the unfettered freedom of the individual should be tempered with mutual consultation and sacrifice,” and that “the spirit of initiative and enterprise should be reinforced by a deeper realization of the supreme necessity for concerted action and a fuller devotion to the common weal.” And so it is that all come to discern with ease those areas of activity in which the individual can best exercise initiative and those which fall to the institutions alone. “With heart and soul”, the friends follow the directives of their institutions, so that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “things may be properly ordered and well arranged”. This, of

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course, is not a blind obedience; it is an obedience that marks the emergence of a mature human race which grasps the implications of a system as far-reaching as Bahá'u'lláh's new World Order.

3.42 And those who are called upon from among the ranks of such enkindled souls to serve on the institutions of that mighty system understand well the Guardian's words that "their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the friends whom they represent." "Never" would they be "led to suppose that they are the central ornaments of the body of the Cause, intrinsically superior to others in capacity or merit, and sole promoters of its teachings and principles." "With extreme humility," they approach their tasks and "endeavor, by their open-mindedness, their high sense of justice and duty, their candor, their modesty, their entire devotion to the welfare and interests of the friends, the Cause, and humanity, to win, not only the confidence and the genuine support and respect of those whom they serve, but also their esteem and real affection." Within the environment thus created, institutions invested with authority see themselves as instruments for nurturing human potential, ensuring its unfoldment along avenues productive and meritorious.

3.43 Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls,

that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendors of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not."

As more and more receptive souls embrace the Cause of God and throw in their lot with those already participating in the global enterprise under way, the development and activity of the individual, the institutions, and the community are sure to receive a mighty thrust forward. May a bewildered humanity see in the relationships being forged among these three protagonists by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh a pattern of collective life that will propel it towards its high destiny. This is our ardent prayer in the Holy Shrines.

3.44

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

1 January 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

For the past five days, the Continental Counsellors have been gathered in conference in the Holy Land, engaged in earnest deliberation at once insightful and clear visioned, well grounded and confident, on the progress of the Divine Plan. The joy and wonder of this gathering, now entering its closing moments, has come from the vivid retelling of your numerous exploits, deeds which secured the astonishing attainment of the goal of the Five Year Plan one year early. It is hard to express in words how much love for you has been shown in these few, fleeting days. We praise God that He has raised up a community so accomplished and render thanks to Him for releasing your marvelous potentialities. You it is who, whether in collective endeavors or individual efforts, are presenting the verities of the Faith and assisting souls to recognize the Blessed Beauty. You it is who, in your tens of thousands, are serving as tutors of study circles wherever receptivity is kindled. You it is who, without thought of self, are providing spiritual education to the child and kindly fellowship to the junior youth. You it is who, through visits to homes and invitations to yours, are forging ties of spiritual kinship that foster a sense of community. You it is who, when called to serve on the institutions and agencies of the Cause, are accompanying others and rejoicing in their achievements. And it is all of us, whatever our share in this undertaking, who labor and long, strive and supplicate for the transformation of humanity, envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh, to be hastened. 4.1

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A new five-year horizon now beckons, rich with portent. The features of the Plan that will begin this Riḍván are set out in a letter we addressed to the Counsellors Conference at its opening session and which was transmitted to National Spiritual Assemblies the same day. We hope that you will be able to give it thoughtful study, alongside the message we addressed to you at Riḍván 2010, at gatherings of all kinds—whether at the national, regional, or cluster level, in local communities, in neighborhoods and villages, or in the home. We are certain that, through the consultations about the Plan in which you participate, your understanding will deepen and, conscious of the spiritual forces that support you, you will resolve to make this global enterprise a personal concern and become as occupied with the well-being of the human family as you are with that of your dearest kin. It brings us great joy that so many souls throughout the Bahá'í community are ready to thus distinguish themselves. But what gratifies us beyond this is the certain knowledge that victories will be won in the next five years by youth and adults, men and women, who may at present be wholly unaware of Bahá'u'lláh's coming, much less acquainted with the "society-building power" of His Faith. For you possess a potent instrument for spiritually empowering the masses of humanity to take charge of their own destiny, an instrument tempered in the crucible of experience. You know well, and have heard clearly, the call of Bahá'u'lláh: "I am the Sun of Wisdom and the Ocean of Knowledge. I cheer the faint and revive the dead. I am the guiding Light that illumineth the way. I am the royal Falcon on the arm of the Almighty. I unfold the drooping wings of every broken bird and start it on its flight."

4.3

Our abiding prayers are with each of you.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2011

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

At the opening of this glorious season our eyes are brightened as we behold the newly unveiled brilliance of the gilded dome that crowns the exalted Shrine of the Báb. Restored to the supernal luster intended for it by Shoghi Effendi, that august edifice once again shines out to land, sea, and sky, by day and by night, attesting the majesty and holiness of Him Whose hallowed remains are embosomed within. 5.1

This moment of joy synchronizes with the close of an auspicious chapter in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Only a single decade remains of the first century of the Formative Age, the first hundred years to be spent beneath the benevolent shade of the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Five Year Plan now ending is succeeded by another, the features of which have already been made the object of intense study across the Bahá'í world. Indeed, we could not be more gratified by the response to our message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors and to the Riḍván message of twelve months ago. Not satisfied with a fragmentary grasp of their contents, the friends are returning to these messages again and again, singly and in groups, at formal meetings and spontaneous gatherings. Their understanding is enriched through active and informed participation in the programs of growth being nurtured in their clusters. Consequently, the Bahá'í community worldwide has consciously 5.2

absorbed in a few months what it needs to propel it into a confident start to the coming decade.

5.3 Over the same period, cumulative instances of political upheaval and economic turmoil on various continents have shaken governments and peoples. Societies have been brought to the brink of revolution, and in notable cases over the edge. Leaders are finding that neither arms nor riches guarantee security. Where the aspirations of the people have gone unfulfilled, a store of indignation has accrued. We recall how pointedly Bahá'u'lláh admonished the rulers of the earth: "Your people are your treasures. Beware lest your rule violate the commandments of God, and ye deliver your wards to the hands of the robber." A word of caution: No matter how captivating the spectacle of the people's fervor for change, it must be remembered that there are interests which manipulate the course of events. And, so long as the remedy prescribed by the Divine Physician is not administered, the tribulations of this age will persist and deepen. An attentive observer of the times will readily recognize the accelerated disintegration, fitful but relentless, of a world order lamentably defective.

5.4 Yet, discernible too is its counterpart, the constructive process that the Guardian associated with "the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh" and described as "the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must ere long establish." Its indirect effects can be seen in the outpouring of feeling, especially from the young, that springs from a longing to contribute to societal development. It is a bounty accorded to the followers of the Ancient Beauty that this longing, which wells up inexorably from the human spirit in every land, is able to find such eloquent expression in the work the Bahá'í community is carrying out to build capacity for

effective action amongst the diverse populations of the planet. Can any privilege compare with this?

5.5 For insight into this work let every believer look to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the centenary of Whose "epoch-making journeys" to Egypt and the West is being marked at this time. Tirelessly, He expounded the teachings in every social space: in homes and mission halls, churches and synagogues, parks and public squares, railway carriages and ocean liners, clubs and societies, schools and universities. Uncompromising in defense of the truth, yet infinitely gentle in manner, He brought the universal divine principles to bear on the exigencies of the age. To all without distinction—officials, scientists, workers, children, parents, exiles, activists, clerics, skeptics—He imparted love, wisdom, comfort, whatever the particular need. While elevating their souls, He challenged their assumptions, reoriented their perspectives, expanded their consciousness, and focused their energies. He demonstrated by word and deed such compassion and generosity that hearts were utterly transformed. No one was turned away. Our great hope is that frequent recollection, during this centennial period, of the Master's matchless record will inspire and fortify His sincere admirers. Set His example before your eyes and fix your gaze upon it; let it be your instinctive guide in your pursuit of the aim of the Plan.

5.6 At the inception of the Bahá'í community's first global Plan, Shoghi Effendi described in compelling language the successive stages by which the divine light had been kindled in the Síyáh-Chál, clothed in the lamp of revelation in Baghdád, spread to countries in Asia and Africa even as it shone with added brilliancy in Adrianople and later in 'Akká, projected across the seas to the remaining continents, and by which it would be progressively diffused over the states and

dependencies of the world. The final part of this process he characterized as the “penetration of that light . . . into all the remaining territories of the globe”, referring to it as “the stage at which the light of God’s triumphant Faith shining in all its power and glory will have suffused and enveloped the entire planet.” Though that goal is far from being fulfilled, the light already blazes intensely in many a region. In some countries it shines in every cluster. In the land where that inextinguishable light was first ignited, it burns bright despite those who would snuff it out. In diverse nations it achieves a steady glow across whole neighborhoods and villages, as candle after candle in heart after heart is lighted by the Hand of Providence; it illuminates thoughtful conversation at every level of human interaction; it casts its beams upon a myriad initiatives taken to promote the well-being of a people. And in every instance it radiates from a faithful believer, a vibrant community, a loving Spiritual Assembly—each a beacon of light against the gloom.

5.7 We pray earnestly at the Sacred Threshold that each one of you, bearers of the undying flame, may be surrounded by the potent confirmations of Bahá’u’lláh as you convey to others the spark of faith.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

12 December 2011

To all National Spiritual Assemblies

Dearly loved Friends,

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

6.2 In this connection, we are particularly happy to note the degree of effort being exerted in every country to lend an added measure of vitality to the institute process, so critical if increasing numbers are to participate actively in the work required to bring into reality a new World Order. The operation of the institute board; the functioning of coordinators at different levels; the capabilities of friends serving as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, teachers of children’s classes; and the promotion of an environment conducive at once to universal participation and mutual support and assistance—nowhere is the centrality of

these to the fulfillment of the community's God-given mission lost on the friends. What has been especially heartening to observe in this respect is the widespread mobilization of resources dedicated to the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme. No less encouraging is the zeal with which institutes have greeted the challenge of preparing teachers for successive grades of Bahá'í children's classes as additional materials for this purpose have been made available. It seems timely, then, to offer National Spiritual Assemblies and their training institutes further guidance on the implementation of the main sequence of courses and those that branch off from it.

The path of service

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

is its organizing principle: developing capacity to serve the Cause and humanity in a process likened to walking a path of service. This conception shapes both content and structure.

6.4 The main sequence of courses is organized so as to set the individual, whether Bahá'í or not, on a path being defined by the accumulating experience of the community in its endeavor to open before humanity the vision of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. The very notion of a path is, itself, indicative of the nature and purpose of the courses, for a path invites participation, it beckons to new horizons, it demands effort and movement, it accommodates different paces and strides, it is structured and defined. A path can be experienced and known, not only by one or two but by scores upon scores; it belongs to the community. To walk a path is a concept equally expressive. It requires of the individual volition and choice; it calls for a set of skills and abilities but also elicits certain qualities and attitudes; it necessitates a logical progression but admits, when needed, related lines of exploration; it may seem easy at the outset but becomes more challenging further along. And crucially, one walks the path in the company of others.

6.5 At present the main sequence consists of eight courses, though it is understood there may eventually be as many as eighteen that will address acts of service related to such requirements as coordination and administration, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. There are currently two points along the sequence at which an individual may choose to follow a specialized path of service. The first appears at Book 3. From among the friends who complete it and begin to offer a relatively simple class for children in the first grade of a programme for their spiritual education, a percentage will want to dedicate themselves

to this field of service, pursuing in time a series of progressively more complex branch courses for teaching Grades 2 to 6. This does not mean that they will abandon study of the main sequence. Indeed, courses that make up a specialized path of service anticipate that participants are continuing to progress, each at a pace suitable to his or her situation, along the path traced out by the main sequence. Book 5, which seeks to raise up animators of junior youth groups, constitutes the second point at which a series of courses branch out.

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

Coordination

- 6.7 Clearly, the approach to capacity building described above represents an attempt to achieve a certain dynamics within a population that brings together service and the generation of knowledge and its diffusion, a subject which we discussed, albeit briefly, in our Riḍván 2010 message. Here we address a few practical considerations, which the emergence of the two

aforementioned specialized paths of service has made all the more relevant.

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

- 6.9 From another perspective one thinks in terms of the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified as they, for example, participate in devotional gatherings and the Nineteen Day Feast and receive visits at their homes; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan. The question of teaching among receptive populations moves to the foreground in this light, and the challenge of seeking out souls who are willing to engage in a conversation about the world around

them and participate in a collective effort to transform it comes into focus.

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

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

to enhance the functioning of that agency at the regional level. Where such a mature scheme of coordination is brought into place, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants will be able to provide support across all areas of action with even greater effectiveness.

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

Classes for children

6.13 Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses. The units that comprise the three books currently available contain both materials for study by teachers and lessons for children, allowing institutes to establish without delay the first three grades of a six-year programme. To raise up an initial corps of teachers for these grades, they may well have to employ temporary measures. A good scheme of coordination, built incrementally in keeping with demands on the ground, should make it possible to respond to exigencies with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the integrity of the overall educational process in the long term.

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

teaching-learning experience depends, to a great extent, on the capabilities of the teacher.

A word of caution seems to be in order. It is certainly not incorrect to speak of "training" children's class teachers or, for that matter, animators of junior youth groups. Institutes, however, ought to take care, lest they begin to perceive their work as training in techniques, losing sight of the conception of capacity building at the heart of the institute process that entails a profound understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. 6.15

Educational materials

In light of the foregoing paragraphs, the question of educational materials specifically as they pertain to children's classes and to junior youth groups has to be considered. With regard to the former, we explained in our Riḍván 2010 message that the lessons prepared by the Ruhi Institute would constitute the core of a programme for the spiritual education of children, around which secondary elements could be organized. Whether or not any additional elements are required to reinforce the educational process for each grade would generally be determined by teachers themselves, on the basis of specific circumstances, not infrequently in consultation with the institute coordinator at the cluster level. It is assumed that, if found to be appropriate, any additional items would be selected from resources readily available. There will seldom be cause to formalize the use of such items, whether directly through their adoption by training institutes or indirectly through their widespread systematic promotion. 6.16

In the case of junior youth groups, a similar approach is encouraged by the Office of Social and Economic Development. The core of the programme 6.17

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

6.18 In all such matters, those serving as teachers and animators alike are called upon to exercise discretion. Education is a vast field, and educational theories abound. Surely many have considerable merit, but it should be remembered that none is free of assumptions about the nature of the human being and society. An educational process should, for example, create in a child awareness of his or her potentialities, but the glorification of self has to be scrupulously avoided. So often in the name of building confidence the ego is bolstered. Similarly, play has its place in the education of the young. Children and junior youth, however, have proven time and again their capacity to engage in discussions on abstract subjects, undertaken at a level appropriate to their age, and derive great joy from the serious pursuit of understanding. An educational process that dilutes content in a mesmerizing sea of entertainment does them no service. We trust that, in studying the institute courses, teachers and animators will find themselves increasingly equipped to make

judicious decisions in selecting any materials or activities necessary, whether from traditional educational sources or from the wealth of items, such as songs, stories, and games, that are sure to be developed for the young in the Bahá'í community in the years to come.

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

prevalent in the world that give license to those with financial resources to impose their cultural perspective on others, inundating them with materials and products aggressively promoted. Further, every effort should be made to protect spiritual education from the perils of commercialization. The Ruhi Institute itself has explicitly discouraged the proliferation of products and items that treat its identity as a brand to be marketed. We hope that the friends will respect its diligence in this matter.

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

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

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

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Midafternoon on the eleventh day of the Riḍván festival one hundred years ago, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, standing before an audience several hundred strong, lifted a workman's axe and pierced the turf covering the Temple site at Grosse Pointe, north of Chicago. Those invited to break the ground with Him on that spring day came from diverse backgrounds—Norwegian, Indian, French, Japanese, Persian, indigenous American, to name but a few. It was as if the House of Worship, yet unbuilt, was fulfilling the wishes of the Master, expressed on the eve of the ceremony, for every such edifice: "that humanity might find a place of meeting" and "that the proclamation of the oneness of mankind shall go forth from its open courts of holiness". 7.1

His listeners on that occasion, and all who heard Him in the course of His travels to Egypt and the West, must have but dimly comprehended the far-reaching implications of His words for society, for its values and preoccupations. Still today, can anyone claim to have glimpsed anything but an intimation, distant and indistinct, of the future society to which the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is destined to give rise? For let none suppose that the civilization towards which the divine teachings impel humankind will follow merely from adjustments to the present order. Far from it. In a talk 7.2

delivered some days after He laid the cornerstone of the Mother Temple of the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated that "among the results of the manifestation of spiritual forces will be that the human world will adapt itself to a new social form," that "the justice of God will become manifest throughout human affairs". These, and countless other utterances of the Master to which the Bahá'í community is turning time and again in this centennial period, raise awareness of the distance that separates society as it is now arranged from the stupendous vision His Father gifted to the world.

7.3 Alas, notwithstanding the laudable efforts, in every land, of well-intentioned individuals working to improve circumstances in society, the obstacles preventing the realization of such a vision seem insurmountable to many. Their hopes founder on erroneous assumptions about human nature that so permeate the structures and traditions of much of present-day living as to have attained the status of established fact. These assumptions appear to make no allowance for the extraordinary reservoir of spiritual potential available to any illumined soul who draws upon it; instead, they rely for justification on humanity's failings, examples of which daily reinforce a common sense of despair. A layered veil of false premises thus obscures a fundamental truth: The state of the world reflects a distortion of the human spirit, not its essential nature. The purpose of every Manifestation of God is to effect a transformation in both the inner life and external conditions of humanity. And this transformation naturally occurs as a growing body of people, united by the divine precepts, collectively seeks to develop spiritual capacities to contribute to a process of societal change. Akin to the hard earth struck by the Master a century ago, the prevailing theories of the age may, at first, seem impervious to alteration, but they will undoubtedly fade away, and

through the "vernal showers of the bounty of God", the "flowers of true understanding" will spring up fresh and fair.

7.4 We yield thanks to God that, through the potency of His Word, you—the community of His Greatest Name—are cultivating environments wherein true understanding can blossom. Even those enduring imprisonment for the Faith are, by their untold sacrifice and steadfastness, enabling the "hyacinths of knowledge and wisdom" to flower in sympathetic hearts. Across the globe, eager souls are being engaged in the work of constructing a new world through the systematic implementation of the provisions of the Five Year Plan. So well have its features been grasped that we feel no need to comment further on them here. Our supplications, offered at the Threshold of an All-Bountiful Providence, are for the assistance of the Supreme Concurrence to be vouchsafed to every one of you in contributing to the progress of the Plan. Our fervent desire, bolstered by witnessing your consecrated efforts during the past year, is that you will intensify your sure-footed application of the knowledge you are acquiring through experience. Now is not the time to hold back; too many remain unaware of the new dawn. Who but you can convey the divine message? "By God," Bahá'u'lláh, referring to the Cause, affirms, "this is the arena of insight and detachment, of vision and upliftment, where none may spur on their chargers save the valiant horsemen of the Merciful, who have severed all attachment to the world of being."

7.5 To observe the Bahá'í world at work is to behold a vista bright indeed. In the life of the individual believer who desires, above all, to invite others into communion with the Creator and to render service to humanity can be found signs of the spiritual transformation intended for every soul by the Lord of the Age. In the spirit animating the activities of any Bahá'í community

dedicated to enhancing the capacity of its members young and old, as well as of its friends and collaborators, to serve the common weal can be perceived an indication of how a society founded upon divine teachings might develop. And in those advanced clusters where activity governed by the framework of the Plan is in abundance and the demands of ensuring coherence amongst lines of action are most pressing, the evolving administrative structures offer glimmerings, however faint, of how the institutions of the Faith will incrementally come to assume a fuller range of their responsibilities to promote human welfare and progress. Clearly, then, the development of the individual, the community, and the institutions holds immense promise. But beyond this, we note with particular joy how the relationships binding these three are marked by such tender affection and mutual support.

7.6 By contrast, relations among the three corresponding actors in the world at large—the citizen, the body politic, and the institutions of society—reflect the discord that characterizes humanity’s turbulent stage of transition. Unwilling to act as interdependent parts of an organic whole, they are locked in a struggle for power which ultimately proves futile. How very different the society which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in unnumbered Tablets and talks, depicts—where everyday interactions, as much as the relations of states, are shaped by consciousness of the oneness of humankind. Relationships imbued with this consciousness are being cultivated by Bahá’ís and their friends in villages and neighbourhoods across the world; from them can be detected the pure fragrances of reciprocity and cooperation, of concord and love. Within such unassuming settings, a visible alternative to society’s familiar strife is emerging. So it becomes apparent that the individual who wishes to exercise self-expression responsibly

participates thoughtfully in consultation devoted to the common good and spurns the temptation to insist on personal opinion; a Bahá’í institution, appreciating the need for coordinated action channelled toward fruitful ends, aims not to control but to nurture and encourage; the community that is to take charge of its own development recognizes an invaluable asset in the unity afforded through whole-hearted engagement in the plans devised by the institutions. Under the influence of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, the relationships among these three are being endowed with new warmth, new life; in aggregate, they constitute a matrix within which a world spiritual civilization, bearing the imprint of divine inspiration, gradually matures.

7.7 The light of the Revelation is destined to illumine every sphere of endeavour; in each, the relationships that sustain society are to be recast; in each, the world seeks examples of how human beings should be to one another. We offer for your consideration, given its conspicuous part in generating the ferment in which so many people have recently been embroiled, the economic life of humanity, where injustice is tolerated with indifference and disproportionate gain is regarded as the emblem of success. So deeply entrenched are such pernicious attitudes that it is hard to imagine how any one individual can alone alter the prevailing standards by which the relationships in this domain are governed. Nevertheless, there are certainly practices a Bahá’í would eschew, such as dishonesty in one’s transactions or the economic exploitation of others. Faithful adherence to the divine admonitions demands there be no contradiction between one’s economic conduct and one’s beliefs as a Bahá’í. By applying in one’s life those principles of the Faith that relate to fairness and equity, a single soul can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself.

Humanity is weary for want of a pattern of life to which to aspire; we look to you to foster communities whose ways will give hope to the world.

7.8 In our Riḍvān message of 2001, we indicated that in countries where the process of entry by troops was sufficiently well advanced and conditions in national communities were favourable, we would approve the establishment of Houses of Worship at the national level, whose emergence would become a feature of the Fifth Epoch of the Formative Age of the Faith. With exceeding joy we now announce that national Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up in two countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Papua New Guinea. In these, the criteria we set are demonstrably met, and the response of their peoples to the possibilities created by the current series of Plans has been nothing short of remarkable. With the construction of the last of the continental temples in Santiago under way, the initiation of projects for building national Houses of Worship offers yet another gratifying evidence of the penetration of the Faith of God into the soil of society.

7.9 One more step is possible. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkár, described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "one of the most vital institutions of the world", weds two essential, inseparable aspects of Bahá'í life: worship and service. The union of these two is also reflected in the coherence that exists among the community-building features of the Plan, particularly the burgeoning of a devotional spirit that finds expression in gatherings for prayer and an educational process that builds capacity for service to humanity. The correlation of worship and service is especially pronounced in those clusters around the world where Bahá'í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in

social action is apparent. Some of these have been designated as sites for the dissemination of learning so as to nurture the friends' ability to advance the junior youth programme in associated regions. The capacity to sustain this programme, as we have recently indicated, also fuels the development of study circles and children's classes. Thus, beyond its primary purpose, the learning site fortifies the entire scheme of expansion and consolidation. It is within these clusters that, in the coming years, the emergence of a local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs can be contemplated. Our hearts brimming with thankfulness to the Ancient Beauty, we rejoice to inform you that we are entering into consultations with respective National Spiritual Assemblies regarding the erection of the first local House of Worship in each of the following clusters: Battambang, Cambodia; Bihar Sharif, India; Matunda Soy, Kenya; Norte del Cauca, Colombia; and Tanna, Vanuatu.

To support the construction of the two national and five local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs, we have decided to establish a Temples Fund at the Bahá'í World Centre for the benefit of all such projects. The friends everywhere are invited to contribute to it sacrificially, as their means allow. 7.10

Beloved co-workers: The ground broken by the hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá a hundred years ago is to be broken again in seven more countries, this being but the prelude to the day when within every city and village, in obedience to the bidding of Bahá'u'lláh, a building is upraised for the worship of the Lord. From these Dawning-Points of the Remembrance of God will shine the rays of His light and peal out the anthems of His praise. 7.11

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

8 February 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Within communities of every size and strength, we are glad to see the processes of the Five Year Plan kindling the spirit of service and stimulating purposeful action. Examples appear every day of how the act of reaching out to touch individual hearts, acquainting souls with the Word of God, and inviting them to contribute to the betterment of society can, in time, tend to the advancement of a people. This collective movement becomes discernible when the Plan's elements are combined into a well-coordinated cluster-wide effort, the dynamics of which are becoming increasingly familiar. Such a cluster becomes the setting for experienced believers as much as those newly introduced to the Faith, whatever their age or background, to work side by side, accompanying one another in their service, enabling everyone to participate in the unfoldment of the Plan. 8.1

From the panorama of the Bahá'í world engaged in earnest activity, one phenomenon strikes us especially: the decisive contribution made by youth on every continent. In this phenomenon we see the vindication of the hopes the beloved Guardian invested in them "for the future progress and expansion of the Cause" and of the confidence with which he laid upon their shoulders "all the responsibility for the upkeep of the spirit of selfless 8.2

service among their fellow-believers". We are struck, too, by the number of youth who, after only a brief association with the Bahá'í community, commit themselves to meaningful acts of service and quickly discover their affinity with the Faith's community-building endeavour. Indeed, in contemplating both the Bahá'í youth and their like-minded peers, we cannot but rejoice at their eagerness to take on a measure of responsibility to aid the spiritual and social development of those around them, especially ones younger than themselves. In an age consumed by self-interest, in which even spiritual affiliation is weighed in the scales of reward and personal satisfaction, it is heartening to encounter individuals from their mid-teens to their twenties—those upon whom the sights of an aggressive materialism are decidedly trained—who are galvanized by the vision of Bahá'u'lláh and are ready to put the needs of others before their own. That such high-minded youth, by dint of their own exertions as well as the momentum they lend to the whole community, should be contributing so effectively to efforts everywhere under way bodes well for the anticipated acceleration of these efforts.

8.3 What has been accomplished in the past two years will, surely, be far surpassed, not just in the concluding years of this present Plan but in the remaining years of the first century of the Formative Age. To spur on this mighty enterprise and to summon today's youth to fully assume the responsibilities they must discharge in this fast-contracting interval, we announce the convocation of 95 youth conferences, between July and October, planned for locations that span the globe: Accra, Addis Ababa, Aguascalientes, Almaty, Antananarivo, Apia, Atlanta, Auckland, Baku, Bangalore, Bangui, Bardiya, Battambang, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Boston, Brasília, Bridgetown, Bukavu, Cali, Canoas, Cartagena de Indias, Chennai, Chibombo, Chicago, Chişinău, Cochabamba,

Daidanaw, Dakar, Dallas, Danané, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka, Dnipropetrovsk, Durham (United States), Frankfurt, Guwahati, Helsinki, Istanbul (2), Jakarta, Johannesburg, Kadugannawa, Kampala, Kananga, Karachi, Khujand, Kinshasa, Kolkata, Kuching, Lae, Lima, London, Lubumbashi, Lucknow, Macau, Madrid, Manila, Matunda Soy, Moscow, Mwinilunga, Mzuzu, Nadi, Nairobi, New Delhi, Oakland, Otavalo, Ouagadougou, Panchgani, Paris, Patna, Perth, Phoenix, Port-au-Prince, Port Dickson, Port Moresby, Port-Vila, San Diego, San José (Costa Rica), San Jose City (Philippines), San Salvador, Santiago, Sapele, Sarh, Seberang Perai, South Tarawa, Sydney, Tbilisi, Thyolo, Tirana, Toronto, Ulaanbaatar, Vancouver, Verona, Yaoundé. We extend an invitation to these gatherings to every youth who recognizes in the methods and instruments of the Plan potent means for movement towards a better society. And from Bahá'ís of all ages, we invite wholehearted support for the participants upon whose efforts so much depends.

8.4 Beloved friends: To every generation of young believers comes an opportunity to make a contribution to the fortunes of humanity, unique to their time of life. For the present generation, the moment has come to reflect, to commit, to steel themselves for a life of service from which blessing will flow in abundance. In our prayers at the Sacred Threshold, we entreat the Ancient Beauty that, from out a distracted and bewildered humanity, He may distil pure souls endowed with clear sight: youth whose integrity and uprightness are not undermined by dwelling on the faults of others and who are not immobilized by any shortcomings of their own; youth who will look to the Master and "bring those who have been excluded into the circle of intimate friends"; youth whose consciousness of the failings of society impels them to work for its transformation, not

to distance themselves from it; youth who, whatever the cost, will refuse to pass by inequity in its many incarnations and will labour, instead, that “the light of justice may shed its radiance upon the whole world.”

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

Riḍván 2013

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

“The Book of God is wide open, and His Word is summoning mankind unto Him.” In such exhilarating terms does the Supreme Pen describe the advent of the day of union and ingathering. Bahá'u'lláh continues: “Incline your ears, O friends of God, to the voice of Him Whom the world hath wronged, and hold fast unto whatsoever will exalt His Cause.” He further exhorts His followers: “With the utmost friendliness and in a spirit of perfect fellowship take ye counsel together, and dedicate the precious days of your lives to the betterment of the world and the promotion of the Cause of Him Who is the Ancient and Sovereign Lord of all.” 9.1

Beloved co-workers: This stirring pronouncement comes to mind unbidden when we see your consecrated efforts around the world in answer to the call of Bahá'u'lláh. The splendid response to His summons can be witnessed on every side. To those who pause to reflect on the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, it becomes impossible to ignore how the power possessed by the Word of God is ascendant in the hearts of women and men, children and youth, in country after country, in cluster after cluster. 9.2

A worldwide community is refining its ability to read its immediate reality, analyse its possibilities, and apply judiciously the methods and instruments of 9.3

the Five Year Plan. As anticipated, experience is most rapidly accumulating in clusters where the frontiers of learning are being consciously advanced. In such places, the means for enabling an ever-rising number of individuals to strengthen their capacity for service are well understood. A vibrant training institute functions as the mainstay of the community's efforts to advance the Plan and, as early as possible, skills and abilities developed through participation in institute courses are deployed in the field. Some, through their everyday social interactions, encounter souls who are open to the exploration of spiritual matters carried out in a variety of settings; some are in a position to respond to receptivity in a village or neighbourhood, perhaps by having relocated to the area. Growing numbers arise to shoulder responsibility, swelling the ranks of those who serve as tutors, animators, and teachers of children; who administer and coordinate; or who otherwise labour in support of the work. The friends' commitment to learning finds expression through constancy in their own endeavours and a willingness to accompany others in theirs. Further, they are able to keep two complementary perspectives on the pattern of action developing in the cluster firmly in view: one, the three-month cycles of activity—the rhythmic pulse of the programme of growth—and the other, the distinct stages of a process of education for children, for junior youth, and for youth and adults. While understanding clearly the relationship that connects these three stages, the friends are aware that each has its own dynamics, its own requirements, and its own inherent merit. Above all, they are conscious of the operation of powerful spiritual forces, whose workings can be discerned as much in the quantitative data that reflect the community's progress as in the array of accounts that narrate its accomplishments. What is especially promising is that so many of these

distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development.

As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavours. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives. Equally, they have come to recognize that when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time, but that this in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavours. For they understand that if learning is to be their mode of operation, they must be alert to the potential offered by any instrument of the Plan that proves to be especially suited to a particular point in time and, where called for, invest greater energy in its development; it does not follow, however, that every person must be occupied with the same aspect of the Plan. The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a programme of growth to be directed towards the same end. Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals

or collectively; in another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.

9.5

Furthermore, the friends are conscious that the work of the Cause proceeds at different speeds in different places and for good reason—it is, after all, an organic phenomenon—and they take joy and encouragement from every instance of progress they see. Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all. Gatherings for reflection are increasingly seen as occasions where the community's efforts, in their entirety, are the subject of earnest and uplifting deliberation. Participants learn what has been accomplished overall, understand their own labours in that light, and enhance their knowledge about the process of growth by absorbing the counsels of the institutions and drawing on the experience of their fellow believers. Such experience is also shared in numerous other spaces that are emerging for consultation amongst friends intensely engaged in specific endeavours, whether they are pursuing a common line of action or serving in a particular part of the cluster. All these insights are located in a wider appreciation that progress is most easily achieved in an environment imbued with love—one in which shortcomings are overlooked with forbearance, obstacles are overcome with patience, and tested approaches are embraced with enthusiasm. And so it is that, through the wise direction of institutions and agencies of the Faith functioning at every level, the friends' exertions, however modest individually, coalesce into a collective effort to ensure that receptivity to the call of the Blessed Beauty is identified quickly and nurtured effectively. A cluster in this condition is clearly one where the relationships among

the individual, the institutions, and the community—the Plan's three protagonists—are evolving soundly.

9.6

From this landscape of thriving activity, one prospect deserves particular mention. In the message addressed to you three years ago, we expressed the hope that, in clusters with an intensive programme of growth in operation, the friends would endeavour to learn more about the ways of community building by developing centres of intense activity in neighbourhoods and villages. Our hopes have been exceeded, for even in clusters where the programme of growth has not yet achieved intensity, efforts by a few to initiate core activities among the residents of small areas have demonstrated their efficacy time and again. In essence, this approach centres on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighbourhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt

new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—moulded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.

9.7

While expansion and consolidation have steadily progressed over the past year, other important areas of activity have also moved forward, often in close parallel. As a prime example, the advances at the level of culture being witnessed in some villages and neighbourhoods are due in no small part to what is being learned from Bahá'í involvement in social action. Our Office of Social and Economic Development recently prepared a document which distils thirty years of experience that has accumulated in this field since that Office was established at the Bahá'í World Centre. Among the observations it makes is that efforts to engage in social action are lent vital impetus by the training institute. This is not simply through the rise in human resources it fosters. The spiritual insights, qualities, and abilities that are cultivated by the institute process have proven to be as crucial for participation in social action as they are for contributing to the process of growth. Further, it is explained how the Bahá'í community's distinct spheres of endeavour are governed by a common, evolving, conceptual framework composed of mutually reinforcing elements, albeit these assume

varied expressions in different domains of action. The document we have described was lately shared with National Spiritual Assemblies, and we invite them, in consultation with the Counsellors, to consider how the concepts it explores can help to enhance existing efforts of social action pursued under their auspices and raise consciousness of this significant dimension of Bahá'í endeavour. This should not be interpreted as a general call for widespread activity in this area—the emergence of social action happens naturally, as a growing community gathers strength—but it is timely that the friends reflect more deeply on the implications of their exertions for the transformation of society. The surge in learning that is occurring in this field places increased demands upon the Office of Social and Economic Development, and steps are being taken to ensure that its functioning evolves commensurately.

9.8

An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations. These expressions of appreciation and support have also come from some previously unexpected quarters. For example, even in the Cradle of the Faith, despite formidable obstacles placed by the oppressor in their path, the Bahá'ís are increasingly recognized for the profound implications their message holds for the state of their nation and respected for their unbending determination to contribute to the progress of their homeland.

9.9 The suffering borne by the faithful in Iran, particularly in the decades since the most recent wave of persecutions began, has spurred their brothers and sisters in other countries to come to their defence. From among the invaluable endowments which, as a consequence of that endurance, the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired, we mention one in this connection: an impressive network of specialized agencies at the national level that has proven capable of systematically developing relations with governments and organizations of civil society. Parallel to this, the processes of successive Plans have refined the community's ability to participate in prevalent discourses in every space where they occur—from personal conversations to international forums. At the grassroots, involvement in this kind of endeavour builds naturally, through the same organic approach that characterizes the steady increase of the friends' engagement in social action, and no special attempt to stimulate it is necessary. At the national level, however, it is more often becoming the focus of attention for these same dedicated agencies already functioning in dozens of national communities, and it is proceeding according to the familiar and fruitful pattern of action, reflection, consultation, and study. To enhance such efforts, to facilitate learning in this domain, and to ensure that steps taken are coherent with the other endeavours of the Bahá'í community, we have recently established at the Bahá'í World Centre the Office of Public Discourse. We will call on it to assist National Spiritual Assemblies in this field by gradually promoting and coordinating activities and systematizing experience.

9.10 Encouraging progress is occurring in other areas as well. In Santiago, Chile, where the Mother Temple of South America is being erected, the building work continues apace. The concrete construction of the foundations, basement, and service tunnel is complete, as

are the columns that will bear the superstructure. The anticipation associated with this project is growing, and a similar sense of expectation is stirring in the seven countries where national or local Mashriqu'l-Adhkárs are to be raised up. In each one, preparations have commenced, and the contributions the believers are making to the Temples Fund have begun to be used; however, practical considerations, such as location, design, and resources, represent only one aspect of the work being undertaken by the friends. Fundamentally, theirs is a spiritual endeavour, one in which the whole community participates. The Master refers to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár as "the lodestone of divine confirmations", "the mighty foundation of the Lord", and "the firm pillar of the Faith of God". Wherever it is established, it will naturally be an integral component of the process of community building that surrounds it. Already, in those places where a House of Worship is to appear, awareness of this reality is deepening among the rank and file of the believers, who recognize that their collective life must more and more reflect that union of worship and service which the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár embodies.

9.11 On each front, then, we see the Bahá'í community moving steadily forward, advancing in understanding, eager to acquire insights from experience, ready to take on new tasks when resources make it possible, agile in its response to fresh imperatives, conscious of the need to ensure coherence among the various areas of activity in which it is engaged, wholly dedicated to the fulfilment of its mission. Its enthusiasm and devotion are apparent in the tremendous fervour generated by the announcement some two months ago of the convocation of 95 youth conferences throughout the world. We are gratified not only by the reaction of the youth themselves but also by the expressions of support voiced by their fellow believers, who appreciate how the younger

followers of Bahá'u'lláh act as a vital stimulus to the entire body of the Cause.

9.12

We are filled with hope by the successive evidences we see of the spread of Bahá'u'lláh's message, the reach of its influence, and the growing awareness of the ideals it enshrines. In this season of anniversaries, we call to remembrance that "Day of supreme felicity", separated from this Ridván by a century and a half, when the Abhá Beauty first proclaimed His Mission to His companions in the Najíbíyyih Garden. From that sanctified spot, the Word of God has gone forth to every city and every shore, summoning humanity to an encounter with its Lord. And from that initial retinue of God-intoxicated lovers, a diverse community of purpose has blossomed, variegated flowers in the garden He has reared. With each passing day, rising numbers of newly awakened souls turn in supplication towards His Shrine, the place where we, in honour of that blessed Day and in gratitude for every bounty bestowed upon the community of the Greatest Name, bow our heads in prayer at the Sacred Threshold.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

1 July 2013

To the participants in the forthcoming
114 youth conferences throughout the world

Dearly loved Friends,

When the exalted figure of the Báb, aged just twenty-five, arose to deliver His revolutionizing message to the world, many among those who accepted and spread His teachings were young, even younger than the Báb Himself. Their heroism, immortalized in all its dazzling intensity in *The Dawn-Breakers*, will illumine the annals of human history for centuries to come. Thus began a pattern in which every generation of youth, drawing inspiration from the same divine impulse to cast the world anew, has seized the opportunity to contribute to the latest stage in the unfolding process that is to transform the life of humankind. It is a pattern that has suffered no interruption from the time of the Báb to this present hour.

10.1

The lifelong exertion and sacrifice of your spiritual forebears did much to establish the Faith in diverse lands and to hasten the appearance of a global community of purpose. Though the tasks that lie before you are not the same as theirs, the responsibilities with which you are entrusted are no less vital. After many a decade, the world-embracing labors of this far-flung community to obtain a more adequate understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and to apply the principles it enshrines have culminated in the emergence

10.2

of a potent framework for action, refined through experience. You are fortunate to be familiar with its methods and approaches now so well established. Through perseverance in their implementation, many of you will already have seen for yourselves signs of the society-building power of the divine teachings. At the conference you attend, you are being invited to consider the contribution that can be made by any young person who wishes to answer Bahá'u'lláh's summons and help to release that power. To assist you, a number of themes have been identified for you to explore, beginning with looking at your current time of life.

10.3 Across the world are to be gathered, in scores of youth conferences sharing the same aim, tens of thousands who have much in common. Although your realities are shaped by a broad diversity of circumstances, yet a desire to bring about constructive change and a capacity for meaningful service, both characteristic of your stage of life, are neither limited to any race or nationality, nor dependent upon material means. This bright period of youth you share is experienced by all—but it is brief, and buffeted by numerous social forces. How important it is, then, to strive to be among those who, in the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "plucked the fruit of life".

10.4 With this in mind, we are delighted that so many of you are already engaged in service by conducting community-building activities, as well as by organizing, coordinating, or otherwise administering the efforts of others; in all of these endeavors you are taking an increasing level of responsibility upon your shoulders. Not surprisingly, it is your age group that is gaining the most experience at aiding junior youth, and children too, with their moral and spiritual development, fostering in them capacity for collective service and

true friendship. After all, aware of the world which these young souls will need to navigate, with its pitfalls and also its opportunities, you readily appreciate the importance of spiritual strengthening and preparation. Conscious, as you are, that Bahá'u'lláh came to transform both the inner life and external conditions of humanity, you are assisting those younger than yourselves to refine their characters and prepare to assume responsibility for the well-being of their communities. As they enter adolescence, you are helping them to enhance their power of expression, as well as enabling a strong moral sensibility to take root within them. In so doing, your own sense of purpose is becoming more clearly defined as you heed Bahá'u'lláh's injunction: "Let deeds, not words, be your adorning."

To follow a path of service, whatever form one's activity assumes, requires faith and tenacity. In this connection, the benefit of walking that path in the company of others is immense. Loving fellowship, mutual encouragement, and willingness to learn together are natural properties of any group of youth sincerely striving for the same ends, and should also characterize those essential relationships that bind together the components of society. Given this, we hope the bonds you develop through association with other conference participants will prove abiding. Indeed, long after the gatherings close, may these ties of friendship and common calling help keep your feet firm. 10.5

The possibilities presented by collective action are especially evident in the work of community building, a process that is gaining momentum in many a cluster and in neighborhoods and villages throughout the world that have become centers of intense activity. Youth are often at the forefront of the work in these settings—not only Bahá'í youth, but those of like mind 10.6

who can see the positive effects of what the Bahá'ís have initiated and grasp the underlying vision of unity and spiritual transformation. In such places, the imperative to share the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh with receptive hearts and explore the implications of His message for today's world is keenly felt. When so much of society invites passivity and apathy or, worse still, encourages behavior harmful to oneself and others, a conspicuous contrast is offered by those who are enhancing the capacity of a population to cultivate and sustain a spiritually enriching pattern of community life.

10.7 Yet, although many admire your dynamism and ideals, the true significance of these endeavors is less apparent to the world at large. You, however, are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual's spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one's energies are being channeled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal.

10.8 All these thoughts are openings to an inclusive and ever-expanding conversation that will extend through the conferences and well beyond them as you engage many others in earnest discussions that lift the heart and awaken the mind to the possibilities of what could be. Drawing upon your collective experience will fur-

ther enrich your deliberations. At this propitious time, our hearts will be with you, and as each conference concludes, we will eagerly look to see what will follow. For every gathering we will entreat the Almighty to bestow upon its participants a measure of His boundless grace, knowing, as you do, that divine assistance is promised to all those who arise to serve humankind in response to the galvanizing call of Bahá'u'lláh.

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

April 2013

Insights from the Frontiers of Learning*

A document prepared by
The International Teaching Centre

When the Universal House of Justice at the start of this Five Year Plan called on the Bahá'í world to build on the extraordinary achievements of the previous five years, it described a community that had not only surpassed its numerical goals but had also achieved qualitative progress at the more profound level of culture. Since then, the friends have extended their efforts to an increasing number of clusters, embracing ever-larger contingents of participants in a process of community building. At the close of the Plan's second year, there is already a rich experience that has significant implications for future action. The purpose of the present document is to review this experience and describe a number of approaches that, when applied by the friends in a manner suited to their circumstances, may enable them to accelerate the progress under way. For this review the clusters at the frontiers of learning worldwide will first be considered, then those where the friends are beginning to establish programs of growth, and finally those where efforts are being made to increase intensity. A few words will also be said about administrative arrangements at the regional or national level that support the movement of clusters. 11.1

* The *Frontiers of Learning* video can be found at <http://www.bahai.org/frontiers/>

1. CLUSTERS AT THE FRONTIERS OF LEARNING

11.2 Today, in more than 3,600 clusters around the globe, the friends are striving to establish new programs of growth or to advance existing ones. An analysis of developments in some 200 of the most advanced of these clusters—particularly the strongest 20—suggests effective strategies for growth and demonstrates the efficacy of pursuing lines of action in a coherent manner. The House of Justice has stated this *Ridván* that many of the “distinctive and salient features which characterize the clusters furthest advanced are also evident in communities at much earlier points in their development”.¹ It is hoped, therefore, that a close examination of the pattern of action characteristic of the clusters at the forefront of learning will assist friends laboring in clusters at even the earliest stages of development.

11.3 Advanced clusters generally have a sizeable Bahá’í community and, more significantly, have been effective over time in mobilizing large numbers of individuals in service to the Cause and to society. Some have historically had large communities; others have experienced significant growth only in recent years. Yet, in all of the strongest clusters, those sustaining the various activities of the Plan are counted in the hundreds, while participants may number in the thousands. From among these dedicated friends, some, thoroughly conversant with the processes shaping the cluster, attend to the administrative needs of the Plan as cluster coordinators, members of Area Teaching Committees, members of Local Spiritual Assemblies, or assistants to Auxiliary Board members. A growing number serve as teachers of children’s classes, animators of junior youth groups, or tutors of study circles, and participate in cluster-wide teaching campaigns. Many also lend their talents to a host of other activities in the teaching and administrative fields and to the enrichment of various aspects of

community life. Everyone is aware that participation in the Nineteen Day Feast and observance of the Holy Days are obligations not to be forgotten, and everyone recognizes the importance of devotional gatherings and the quality of the devotional life of the community. A welcome addition to this efficient use of human resources is the focused attention being given by a nucleus of dedicated friends, usually youth, to intensive efforts in a rising number of neighborhoods and villages.

Among the distinguishing characteristics of these advanced clusters, as the following pages will explain, is the ability of the friends to sustain growth in regular three-month cycles, to maintain focus on the educational process that propels progress, to establish a strong community-building effort, to organize their endeavors to meet the challenge of increasing complexity, and to guide a growing involvement with the wider society. 11.4

1.1 A Sustained Rhythm of Expansion and Consolidation

The House of Justice has explained that the pattern of action unfolding in clusters that creates a vibrant community life may be viewed from two, equally valid perspectives. One of these involves “the three-month cycles of activity through which a community grows—the burst of expansion experienced as a result of intense action; the necessary period of consolidation during which increases in ranks are fortified . . . ; and the opportunities designated for all to reflect and plan”.² 11.5

When sustained over time, these three-month cycles of activity set a particular rhythm to community life. Each cycle the friends regularly renew their vision, assess their progress and current challenges, adjust 11.6

their plans of action, and organize intensive phases of activity for expansion and consolidation. These cycles unfold uninterrupted, even though patterns of expansion may vary. Occasional problems retard progress, but the believers are able to surmount obstacles and move on in unified action.

11.7 With a deep appreciation of the imperative of direct teaching when circumstances call for it, the friends in strong clusters have moved beyond a single approach to the expansion phase of their cycles. They have overcome a preoccupation to try to increase in numbers in a relatively short period of time. Their understanding of the framework for action having become deeper, their analysis of the complex array of circumstances and forces more sophisticated, and their reflection on their accomplishments and the challenges ahead more penetrating, they are able to make sound strategic choices in order to respond to the requirements of growth at a given moment.

11.8 “The friends have also learned that it is not necessary for the principal focus of the expansion phase of every cycle of a program of growth to be directed towards the same end”,³ the House of Justice observed at Riḍván 2013. “Conditions may require that in a given cycle, as an example, attention be primarily aimed at inviting souls to embrace the Faith through intensive teaching efforts, undertaken as individuals or collectively; in another cycle, the focus could be on multiplying a specific core activity.”⁴ Similarly, plans for the expansion phase might differ according to the needs of a particular neighborhood or village. Indeed, where resources are plentiful, different groups of individuals may be directed towards different, but complementary objectives in a single expansion phase. In this way, over a span of many cycles, there is a steady increase in the

number of new believers, of core activities and participants, and of those who, when accompanied by others, are able to extend the scope and complexity of the work of expansion and consolidation.

As the process of learning advances, it is natural that “when a new feature is introduced it requires special attention for some time”.⁵ Yet, the House of Justice adds, “This in no way diminishes the significance of other aspects of their community-building endeavors.”⁶ The ability to assign resources to new elements introduced in successive messages from the House of Justice, without shifting the attention of all the Plan’s contributors, allows the friends in the most advanced clusters to make progress towards “the long-cherished goal of universal participation in the affairs of the Faith”.⁷ 11.9

The result of all these considerations is a three-month period filled with a range of lively, diverse, and well-coordinated activities. And even though the rate of progress may vary from place to place depending on the circumstances of various populations, the cycle is characterized by a spirit of unity and a sense of common purpose among the friends throughout the entire cluster. What is important to realize is that such a promising pattern of growth can only be maintained if everyone, in a humble posture of learning, and no matter the extent of his or her activity, offers unqualified support, in deeds and words, to every other soul who labors in the divine vineyard. “All must become as wings to bear one another onward”,⁸ Bahá’u’lláh states. 11.10

1.2 Emergence of a Well-Grounded Educational Process

The second perspective from which the pattern of action in a cluster can be viewed is as an educational process with three distinct stages, “the first for 11.11

the youngest members of the community, the second for those in the challenging transitional years, and the third for youth and adults".⁹ The most advanced clusters demonstrate both the magnitude that such an endeavor can assume and the complexity it entails. In the Lubumbashi cluster of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, the educational process now serves about 6,000 people, including some 3,500 children, 2,200 junior youth, and hundreds of youth and adults in study circles, all supported by an intricate scheme that generates and systematizes knowledge and coordinates the efforts of scores of tutors, animators, and children's class teachers.

11.12 In many parts of the world, it is relatively easy to attract children from the wider society to Bahá'í classes, and parents readily recognize the beneficial influence of spiritual and moral education on the attitudes and behavior of their youngsters. The challenge now being rigorously addressed by training institutes in the most advanced clusters is to systematize the effort and create an enduring system for the spiritual education of children. The House of Justice observed, "Among the range of questions now before every training institute one stands out as particularly pressing: how to mobilize sufficient numbers of children's class teachers for successive grades and, by extension, tutors who can form groups to study the requisite courses."¹⁰ The immensity of the challenge involved in achieving this is recognized. Not only are courses being held to train teachers for the first three grades of the program for which materials currently exist but a network of coordinators and their helpers is also gradually being established in each cluster to accompany the teachers, so that they can learn to sustain the classes and help the children to advance from grade to grade each year. In India, for example, as soon as the materials for Grades 2 and 3 were released

in 2011, the 17 regional institutes organized a series of training seminars, efforts were intensified to translate the materials into Hindi and other regional languages, and regional and cluster coordinators, in consultation with cluster agencies, identified and trained teachers in the new materials. Initial results were encouraging, with nearly 3,000 children moving into Grade 2, and several hundred into Grade 3.

11.13 The junior youth spiritual empowerment program has grown to become an increasingly prominent feature of many advanced clusters in the world. With the help of a network of more than 40 clusters designated as sites for the dissemination of learning about the program guided by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre, a number of practical challenges have been overcome so that the program can be implemented and sustained. Valuable knowledge has been accumulated that has allowed the friends in the learning sites and associated clusters to enhance the efficacy of training and support for animators, to maintain an increasing number of junior youth groups for the requisite three years, to obtain the support of parents and officials, and to carry out the program in the context of the overall pattern of cluster activities. The arrangement for the ongoing dissemination of learning has made it possible in the advanced clusters to raise the number of participants to hundreds and in a few cases to more than a thousand. By instilling in the junior youth a keen sense of purpose, the program has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to transform young people, increase their commitment to spiritual and material education, empower them to undertake social action for the improvement of their communities, resist the destructive and prejudicial forces within their societies, and contribute to the construction of a better world.

11.14 The two stages of the educational process described above are only possible, of course, if there is a movement of individuals through the sequence of courses of the institute, and the most advanced clusters have sustained a continual flow of participants over an extended period of time—some for as many as 20 to 30 cycles. Over the years, various approaches have contributed to this accomplishment worldwide. To initiate the institute process, believers were encouraged to participate in the courses and then, as they engaged others in conversation about the message of Bahá'u'lláh, they found receptivity among friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers, many of whom readily participated in study circles. Subsequently, the believers in many clusters learned to reach out to “segments of the general population with heightened receptivity”¹¹ through direct teaching efforts involving home visits or campaigns, resulting in significant numbers of new Bahá'ís. As increasing attention was given to the youth in these populations, a significant percentage began to enter into study circles. In the most advanced clusters, the capacity to harness the ready response of growing numbers of young people by enabling them to move quickly into the field of action primarily as animators of junior youth groups, but also as participants in or initiators of other core activities, is on the rise. The challenge of increasing the number of tutors who take advantage of this opportunity is being actively pursued as well.

11.15 Experience with youth from receptive populations in advanced clusters suggests that the expansion of the junior youth program has the potential to impart a pronounced boost to all three stages of the educational process. The effort to train animators of junior youth groups, more and more from among youth in the larger society, calls for additional study circles or institute campaigns. Such campaigns could take the form of an

intensive study of Ruhi Institute Books 1 and 5, leading to the immediate establishment of several junior youth groups; over time the majority of animators participate in study circles to complete the remaining books of the sequence, which enhance their abilities for service. As awareness is raised among the families of the junior youth, other members, mostly children and youth but also a few adults, become involved in the stage of the educational process appropriate for them. Indeed, many insights about how to significantly broaden the program to involve large numbers of participants have been derived from experience in those clusters supported by learning sites. These insights have been shared with regional institutes and applied in a manner that assisted with the implementation of other core activities. Finally, in those clusters where the friends have learned to maintain junior youth groups over a number of years until the completion of the program, many junior youth show enthusiasm for the courses of the main sequence and, with their customary zeal and discipline, engage in study and in carrying out the necessary acts of service. Such a promising outcome, though yet modest in its extent, suggests that, as they move through the sequence of courses, these young people could swell the ranks of children's class teachers, animators, and tutors in a cluster. What has been described here is not the only way the educational process advances. However, time and again, the junior youth program has proved its effectiveness as a strategy that merits vigorous pursuit.

1.3 Advances in Community Building

When human resources in a cluster become more abundant, core activities multiply and participation grows. A dynamic and complex pattern of action emerges that touches every aspect of community life.

An evident characteristic of the advanced clusters is a change in understanding that moves beyond concern with the mere multiplication of activities to manifest the deeper implications of the community-building process. In its Ridván 2013 message, the House of Justice states:

11.17 As the experience of the friends has deepened, their capacity for fostering within a cluster a rich and intricate pattern of life, embracing hundreds or even thousands of people, has risen. How pleased we are to note the many insights the believers are gaining from their endeavors. They appreciate, for instance, that the Plan's gradual unfoldment at the level of the cluster is a dynamic process, one that is necessarily complex and does not lend itself to ready simplification. They see how it moves forward as they increase their ability both to raise up human resources and to coordinate and organize well the actions of those who arise. The friends realize that as these capacities are enhanced, it becomes possible to integrate a wider range of initiatives....

11.18 . . . Indeed, they recognize the benefit that accrues from the contribution of each individual to the progress of the whole, and thus the service rendered by each one, in keeping with the possibilities created by a person's circumstances, is welcomed by all.¹²

11.19 The mutually reinforcing character of the core activities and the transformative impact of the institute process become more evident, and sustainable growth and universal participation more feasible, in the smaller, intimate settings of villages and neighborhoods. As the House of Justice explains:

11.20 In essence, this approach centers on the response to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the part of populations who are ready for the spiritual transformation

His Revelation fosters. Through participation in the educational process promoted by the training institute, they are motivated to reject the torpor and indifference inculcated by the forces of society and pursue, instead, patterns of action which prove life altering. Where this approach has advanced for some years in a neighborhood or village and the friends have sustained their focus, remarkable results are becoming gradually but unmistakably evident. Youth are empowered to take responsibility for the development of those around them younger than themselves. Older generations welcome the contribution of the youth to meaningful discussions about the affairs of the whole community. For young and old alike, the discipline cultivated through the community's educational process builds capacity for consultation, and new spaces emerge for purposeful conversation. Yet change is not confined merely to the Bahá'ís and those who are involved in the core activities called for by the Plan, who might reasonably be expected to adopt new ways of thinking over time. The very spirit of the place is affected. A devotional attitude takes shape within a broad sweep of the population. Expressions of the equality of men and women become more pronounced. The education of children, both boys and girls, commands greater attention. The character of relationships within families—molded by assumptions centuries old—alters perceptibly. A sense of duty towards one's immediate community and physical environment becomes prevalent. Even the scourge of prejudice, which casts its baleful shadow on every society, begins to yield to the compelling force of unity. In short, the community-building work in which the friends are engaged influences aspects of culture.¹³

11.21 Of course, not all neighborhoods demonstrate the receptivity necessary to become centers of intense activity, but Bahá'ís, wherever they live, can reach out to others and establish core activities, drawing participants from among their acquaintances wherever they may reside in the cluster. In recognizing the commonalities between two simultaneous thrusts—one deeper in concentrated areas and the other more broadly across the cluster—the friends in the advanced clusters readily appreciate their engagement in a single collective enterprise of community building. A unity in diversity of actions emerges, in which every believer can find a part to play as defined within the Plan's framework for action. And even though different individuals engage in different activities, all share a common purpose and readily appreciate the contribution made by others as they gradually embrace larger and larger numbers of participants in the pattern of their community life.

1.4 An Effective Organizational Scheme

11.22 A cluster advances as more and more capacity for service is developed in a growing number of individuals, who are then assisted to initiate a growing number of interdependent activities that embrace ever-larger numbers of participants. This capacity-building process must, as time goes on, be complemented by an ever more sophisticated system of coordination and support. The House of Justice explained: "Sheer numbers require organizational schemes to take on a higher degree of complexity."¹⁴ Numerical growth, along with the geographic spread of activities in neighborhoods and across the cluster, has necessitated further development of the basic scheme of coordination used to initially establish an intensive program of growth. The experience of the advanced clusters has borne testimony to the words of the House of Justice that "the workings

of this cluster-level system . . . has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities".¹⁵ While it is not possible to distil from the diverse nascent efforts now emerging in advanced clusters worldwide a single approach for general use, at this point at least three dimensions are noteworthy.

In the most advanced clusters, because of increasing complexity, it has become necessary to subdivide the cluster into smaller areas as well as to select neighborhoods or villages for a focused effort to learn about community building. Large urban centers under the jurisdiction of one Local Spiritual Assembly are organized into sectors, while rural and urban clusters with several Local Assemblies are divided by creating a number of units. Examples of such units are the five routes of the Norte del Cauca cluster in Colombia that follow particular bus routes and three areas of Tiriki West in Kenya that resulted from grouping the 72 communities into segments of 20 to 25 neighboring villages. With regard to neighborhoods and villages, deciding what constitutes a small setting has not been easy in all cases. In the sparsely populated Pemba cluster in Zambia, a few small villages next to each other were grouped together to form settings large enough for learning. Conversely, in the Kajang cluster in Malaysia, the friends started by working in large municipal areas but gradually identified within them smaller locations more suited to community-building endeavors.

The designation of multiple units within a cluster allows for the creation of new patterns of coordination to serve the friends in smaller areas. The number of individuals involved in coordination and support depends largely on the growth in participation in these

smaller settings. At a minimum, in the most advanced clusters a trio of coordinators is appointed, one for each of the three defined areas of action of the institute. As various subunits are identified, the more experienced friends may be asked to serve as additional institute coordinators or as helpers to coordinators. In some instances it has been found useful to have a sector teaching or growth committee emerge in a similar way, with the designation of an individual as a sector growth facilitator functioning under the aegis of the Area Teaching Committee. Even down to the level of neighborhoods some informal structures are beginning to take shape, such as a core group that consults, plans, and fosters participation. Where there are a large number of activities, coordinators and growth facilitators are often needed to serve full-time as part of a more formal scheme of coordination. In any case, what is emerging in most clusters in the front ranks is a robust administrative network involving numbers of coordinators and helpers assigned to assist them, currently ranging from about 10 overall in clusters such as Toronto, Canada, to as many as 50 or 60 in Lubumbashi and Tiriki West. In Delhi City, India, the structures in the Harkesh Nagar neighborhood alone involve 26 individuals who support about 200 core activities engaging nearly 1,200 people.

11.25 Another vital and promising development is the increasing participation of Local Spiritual Assemblies. Aware of the guidance provided in the 28 December 2010 message from the House of Justice pertaining to their responsibilities, and enriched by “each member’s personal involvement in the core activities”,¹⁶ Local Assemblies are periodically examining their contribution to the overall effort. Representatives of Assemblies often participate regularly in cluster planning meetings and share with other members the ways in which their

Assembly can support the cycles of activity. Assemblies are also able to think about all community members, providing encouragement and support and ensuring that each finds a meaningful part in the work of expansion and consolidation.

1.5 Greater Involvement in the Life of Society

As the friends in advanced clusters interact more closely with families and form veritable friendships, they have found themselves drawn further and further into the life of society. Their efforts, which emerge naturally through conversation and common concerns, generally consist of “two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity”:¹⁷ participating in the prevalent discourses of society and social action. In both cases, the first steps consist of simple, fairly informal acts; some may eventually evolve into more complex, ongoing endeavors. 11.26

The initial impact made by the friends in their villages and neighborhoods is often on perceptions and values related to the spiritual, moral, and material education of children and youth. As the quality of the children’s classes and junior youth groups has risen, the capacity of the believers to have meaningful conversations on the subjects of education and the moral empowerment of young people has also advanced. As a corollary to this, parents with youngsters participating in the Bahá’í programs have demonstrated a greater appreciation of the importance and commitment to the progress of the academic studies of their children. 11.27

Warm friendships and ongoing conversations among the families in neighborhoods and villages have also led to greater awareness of local needs. Reflection meetings, junior youth groups, or neighborhood Nineteen Day Feasts provide spaces for the community 11.28

to begin to consider how to apply the teachings of the Faith “to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly”.¹⁸ Some efforts have begun on a small scale and are developing organically, implemented by villagers or neighborhood residents themselves. In the Tanna cluster, Vanuatu, for example, a group of junior youth realized that the route across a creek leading to a major intersection was difficult to traverse, particularly for the elderly, so they built a simple bridge and a small basic rest house, where travelers walking long distances could rest or take refuge during a heavy rain.

11.29 Another feature increasingly observed in advanced clusters is the impact the institute process has had in building the capacity and raising the participation of women, who now are often at the forefront of the teaching and administrative work. Women and girls have gained increased confidence by initiating core activities and are having a greater voice in community affairs through participation in reflection meetings and other gatherings. Parents, impressed by the initiative of their daughters in serving as children’s class teachers, animators of junior youth groups, or tutors of study circles, have come to understand the importance of providing girls an education equal to that of boys. And in cultures that have held traditional views that obstruct the advancement of women, young men as well as young women are becoming thoughtful protagonists of change. In the Daga cluster, Papua New Guinea, for example, young women, normally relegated to household chores and child care, are not only being elected members of Local Assemblies but also as Secretary or Chairperson, a development unimaginable even a few years ago.

In addition to these grass-roots stirrings, in certain clusters the efforts of the friends are reinforced through social and economic development activities of Bahá’í-inspired agencies. For example, in the Katuyola village of the Mwinilunga East cluster in Zambia, youth participating in the Preparation for Social Action program offered by the Inshindo Foundation, together with youngsters from several junior youth groups, initiated a tree-planting project to address the high levels of deforestation that had resulted from traditional slash and burn farming methods. This enterprise grew to engage the people of the village and is receiving the support of the local chief, civic authorities, and the forestry department of the government. 11.30

2. EMERGING PROGRAMMES OF GROWTH

In its 28 December message, the Universal House of Justice states that the first milestone, signifying the emergence of a program of growth, is marked by an initial flow of human resources into the field of action: 11.31

That is to say, in whatever combination and however small in number, devotional gatherings, children’s classes and junior youth groups are being maintained by those progressing through the sequence of institute courses and committed to the vision of individual and collective transformation they foster.¹⁹ 11.32

A new program of growth begins as two nascent capacities develop. First, one or more friends in a cluster must be able to help individuals study the institute’s sequence of courses and accompany them as they initiate core activities. Then, these individuals must be able to attract others to participate in the core activities. As efforts along these lines have borne fruit in various 11.33

parts of the world, the institutions concerned set aside exaggerated expectations of what must be achieved before a new program of growth can be said to have emerged.

11.34 Currently the friends in some 1,200 clusters are working to move beyond this first of several milestones in their development, and such efforts must extend to yet another 1,500 to 2,000 clusters in the next three years to achieve the goal of 5,000 set by the House of Justice.

2.1 Establishing a Basis for Building Capacity

11.35 In whatever cluster they reside, whether selected as a goal to receive systematic attention or not, the friends should feel no hesitation to initiate their own effort to establish a program of growth. Even if the work begins modestly with the actions of a few enthusiastic believers in a single neighborhood or village, over time, through a sound institute process, an initial spark can grow into a flame that draws more and more individuals into a unified endeavor. Beyond such initiatives, a number of simple but effective strategies have emerged to support local believers or open virgin areas.

Pioneering

11.36 The House of Justice referred to one of the strategies for initiating a program of growth in its 23 May 2011 message to the Bahá'ís of the world.

11.37 In the next five years, the successful prosecution of the Plan will require the services of several thousand consecrated souls who, spurred on by their love for the Blessed Beauty, will forsake their homes to settle in villages, towns, and cities in order to raise to 5,000 the number of clusters with programs of growth.²⁰

Hundreds of believers have already responded to the call to settle in international and homefront goal clusters and to initiate efforts that give rise to an organic process of growth. In general, many of these have been young people—with experience as tutors of study circles, animators of junior youth groups, and teachers of children's classes—who had learned how to engage naturally with the wider society in their more advanced home clusters. A majority arose as short-term pioneers, and because they often were able to serve full-time for one or two years, progress in growth and community development proceeded at a rapid pace. 11.38

Visiting Teams

In describing how a program of growth emerges, the House of Justice stated that "visiting teams may be called upon to provide impetus to the fledgling set of activities".²¹ Where the institutions found it challenging to raise up pioneers at the start, or where pioneers and local believers could benefit from added support, an individual, sometimes an assistant assigned by an Auxiliary Board member, or teaching teams composed of believers who had solid experience and a collaborative attitude were sent to goal clusters to help firmly establish the institute process. This support was often reinforced by arranging for friends from clusters without growth programs to spend time in a well-developed cluster to increase their understanding through first-hand experience of how to advance a process of growth. 11.39

In the island cluster of Rodrigues, off the coast of Mauritius, many attempts were made to settle short-term homefront pioneers, but whenever they eventually left the island, the growth process invariably stalled. A team of four experienced animators from the mainland came for three weeks with a plan to establish junior 11.40

youth groups and develop resources within the population. The first week, assisted by two local animators, they reached out to 20 junior youth and visited the parents to explain the program. In the second week, they organized a one-week day camp; 15 junior youth attended consistently. In the third week, the animators continued to visit the parents to assess the impact of the program. The younger children asked to have activities as well. From the group of junior youth now involved in the program, three will turn 15 soon and hope to participate in a study circle for Book 1. For their next visit, the team from Mauritius decided to arrange for the study of Book 5 as well as to assist with the junior youth groups.

Institutional Support

11.41 At the start of the Five Year Plan, national communities were encouraged to select, after consultation among the various institutions concerned, a limited number of clusters where they could begin to learn about initiating new programs of growth. Many countries, buoyed by their experience and initial success, already have a process in place to begin work in all the clusters they hope to advance beyond the first milestone before the end of this Plan. Others still need to extend their efforts in this area during the course of the coming year, so that there is sufficient time for the institute process to take root and begin to flourish in every goal cluster.

11.42 “All of the institutions and agencies promoting the aim of the current series of global Plans need to exercise the measure of agility that the birth of such a dynamic process demands”²², the House of Justice states. Whatever strategy is employed to achieve this end, institutional support is essential. A homefront pioneer who settled in the Fianarantsoa cluster of Madagascar found great receptivity. She began by hosting devotional

meetings and offering a children’s class. She was able to engage a few parents of the children in a study circle, but for some time the cluster did not advance further. Assistance from the training institute made the difference. When the regional coordinator visited, together they were able to stimulate the growth process by identifying youth who showed interest in serving as animators of junior youth groups. They made a concerted effort to meet youth and their families, share the aims of the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, and enlist their support. These youth studied the courses of the institute in a nearby urban centre and embraced the Faith. There are now nine junior youth groups of 100 participants. With the local friends actively serving, the cluster moved past the first milestone in a span of only nine months.

2.2 Expanding the Reach of Core Activities

In new clusters where efforts to establish programs of growth have been initiated over the past two years, the friends have taken advantage of “opportunities afforded by [their] personal circumstances”²³ and engaged in conversation with people they come in contact with in daily life—neighbors, parents from their children’s school, shopkeepers, young students, or new acquaintances met in public spaces—about the spiritual and material conditions of their communities. The stories of these myriad encounters have confirmed the observation of the House of Justice that the believers are growing in their capacity “to enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import with people from every walk of life”²⁴ and that any of the core activities “can serve as a stimulus to growth”.²⁵

A mother in Belarus began a children’s class with her two children, and the class grew to nine. Young people

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aged 12 to 14 soon showed interest, and the mother and her husband participated in intensive courses of the training institute to learn how to serve as animators of a junior youth group. After this second core activity got under way, a study circle was added to respond to the growing interest of the children's parents. In a cluster in the United States, a devotional meeting provided an initial impulse for movement. Gradually a study circle was formed with some of the participants from the devotional gathering. Soon after, a children's class was started, followed by a junior youth group. In an emerging cluster in Fiji, the first step was to reach out to youth and invite them to serve as animators to form and sustain junior youth groups. To support the initiative, the Local Spiritual Assembly decided that all its members would also complete a study of Book 5. The initial effort attracted the interest and involvement of youth from the wider society, and as they participated in institute courses, human resources were developed not only to multiply junior youth groups but also to establish children's classes as well.

11.45 These experiences, repeated in various ways in many clusters worldwide, demonstrate how the initial flow of human resources into the arena of systematic action rapidly propels a cluster beyond the first milestone along the continuum of development.

3. INCREASING INTENSITY

11.46 As the reach of core activities continues to expand, a higher level of organization to coordinate efforts emerges, and a distinct rhythm to the cycles of expansion and consolidation becomes apparent. The enthusiasm of the friends grows, their facility with the instruments and methods of the Plan increases, and they become more adept at responding to the unique

social conditions around them. With more activity, they put in place the institutional structures needed to channel their energies and deal with added complexity. In time, they advance towards the second milestone, the establishment of an intensive program of growth.

11.47 While a good deal of effort may be required to move beyond the first milestone, this is only the beginning of many challenges to be addressed in striving to continually increase the intensity of action and sustain the process of growth and community development. Indeed, in some cases, the friends have encountered misunderstandings or obstacles that have sapped their energies or led to a reduction in the scope of their endeavours for some time. With experience they have come to realize that overcoming challenges is an intrinsic part of their journey.

11.48 Thus, in striving to increase intensity so that clusters advance along the continuum of development, the challenge of the institutions becomes, on the one hand, how to sustain and extend the healthy dynamics of fledgling programmes of growth and, on the other, how to revitalize intensive programmes of growth in clusters where the level of activity and the development of human resources seem to have reached a plateau. In this regard, a number of insights and approaches have emerged to assist the friends to "learn to read their own reality, see their own possibilities, make use of their own resources, and respond to the exigencies of large-scale expansion and consolidation to come".²⁶

3.1 Enhancing the Quality of the Institute Process

11.49 In its Riḍvān 2010 message and in the message dated 12 December 2011, the House of Justice discussed the purpose and character of the institute process and the importance of enhancing its quality. Through a deep

study of these messages, the believers and institutions have realized that creating a systematic and vibrant process of human resource development continues to be their primary challenge. They recognize that “in the final analysis, sustained quantitative gains will be contingent on qualitative progress”.²⁷ Replacing an anxiety about “numbers”—whether of core activities, participants, or enrolments—with confidence in the efficacy of the institute process to empower growing contingents of individuals, the friends are placing renewed emphasis on the quality of the educational process at all levels, and especially the quality of study circles. As the House of Justice wrote at Riḍvān 2010, “Much will fall on those who serve as tutors.”²⁸ Theirs is the responsibility to create

11.50 an environment conducive to the spiritual empowerment of individuals, who will come to see themselves as active agents of their own learning, as protagonists of a constant effort to apply knowledge to effect individual and collective transformation.²⁹

11.51 With the aim of enhancing the capacities of those serving as tutors, animators, and children’s class teachers, training institutes around the world have given greater attention to reinforcing the work of cluster institute coordinators on whom rests primary responsibility for accompanying them. In the past two years, special arrangements were made to enable more coordinators to offer additional time—many on a full-time basis. Also, gatherings for cluster coordinators that involved in-depth study of institute materials and reflection on critical concepts contained in them, in conjunction with field visits, were held in many regions and countries. In this way, institute coordinators increased their ability to support the friends in conducting study of the materials of the institute in a manner that fosters understanding

and in implementing the practical components in a way that builds confidence for service. Where this type of profound reflection was incorporated into the structure of training institutes and their regular operations, qualitative progress was observed.

3.2 Providing Greater Structure as Complexity Rises

In clusters that have attained a level of development where “a nascent program for the sustained expansion and consolidation of the Faith can be perceived”,³⁰ the need for administrative structure emerges over time in a natural way and cannot be rushed to correspond to some preconceived scheme. Initially the efforts of the friends have generally been guided and supported by Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. More sophisticated patterns of coordination are required as the number of participants and the level of activity increase. If one of the core activities is growing far beyond the level of the others, it is natural that a coordinator would be put in place for this line of action first. For example, in those clusters where focus was initially directed towards increasing the number of junior youth groups, the junior youth coordinator was the first to be appointed.

“Parallel to the establishment of mechanisms to support the institute process,”³¹ explains the House of Justice, “other administrative structures are gradually taking shape.”³² The question of the timely appearance of an Area Teaching Committee depends on the circumstances in a particular cluster. In clusters that are just beyond the first milestone, although the number of activities and human resources might be increasing, the appointment of an individual as a cluster development facilitator has usually proved to be sufficient to support

the participation of believers and friends of the Faith in home visits, devotional meetings, and other teaching activities. A nucleus for an Area Teaching Committee has generally emerged naturally from among the core of active believers who have demonstrated a capacity to accompany others in service.

11.54 As with other structures in the cluster, the means for planning and reflection has also developed organically, becoming more organized, systematic, and varied as complexity has grown. Initial informal interactions, perhaps facilitated by an Auxiliary Board member or an assistant, eventually give rise to a cluster reflection meeting and to other formal and informal occasions for reflection, such as gatherings for coordinators, tutors, animators, or children’s class teachers; teaching teams; or for the participants working in specific cluster sectors, neighborhoods, or villages.

3.3 Intensifying Community-Building Efforts in Neighborhoods and Villages

11.55 In most clusters, there are a number of Bahá’í communities. Community-building efforts will therefore naturally emerge in all these localities. Participants in core activities are drawn from a wide circle of contacts and possibly from various parts of a cluster. Where the number of believers is few, a special measure of flexibility may be required and friends who live in nearby communities may need to collaborate in their endeavors. In sizeable communities, gatherings in a local center provide an opportunity to host large numbers and demonstrate the distinctive spirit of the Faith, reinforcing the work in smaller settings. Efforts to engage circles of friends in the core activities—university students or young mothers, to mention but two—make a valuable contribution to the overall community-building

process under way. As the friends strive to creatively explore the possibilities around them in more and more parts of the cluster, new believers are welcomed, human resources rose up, and the pattern of community life that germinates through the core activities is gradually extended until it embraces all the believers and their associates. Essential as these efforts are, they eventually reach their own natural pace and scale, and alone, seem insufficient to achieve the thrust required for large-scale expansion and consolidation.

As discussed in section 1.3, particularly promising developments occur when, as the House of Justice explains, some of the friends, often young believers, “become integrated into neighborhoods and dedicate themselves to assisting particularly receptive populations to advance along a path of spiritual development—giving rise to centers of intense activity”.³³ This type of endeavor, a distinguishing feature of the most advanced clusters, offers great promise as well for all clusters where the friends seek to build intensity. In some cases, work in the neighborhoods or villages is initiated as a result of organized, direct teaching activities or a campaign to expand a particular core activity; in others, individuals settle as pioneers for this purpose; and in some, cluster agencies accompany resident believers to further intensify their teaching efforts among their neighbors. In clusters where, from the outset, the junior youth program is singled out as a critical element in advancing the community-building process, agencies identify neighborhoods with a large number of youth and junior youth. In selecting neighborhoods or villages for focused efforts, it has been observed that fostering activity in too many areas at once can dissipate energies. These varied experiences suggest the importance of the friends’ taking an in-depth view of a particular neighborhood or village to understand

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its reality—its resources, its challenges, and the potential of its population to work alongside the Bahá'ís to “begin a process of collective transformation”.³⁴

11.57 When a dedicated team of believers focuses its attention on fostering activity in a neighborhood or village, these friends need to be given latitude to function in a manner that is in harmony with an unfolding organic process and be provided with appropriate support from institutions. They need time to learn how to respond to the demands of growth within a receptive population: how to form genuine friendships, what teaching activities are effective, and how to channel resources to sustain such a growth process. It is not necessary, or even productive, for everyone in the cluster to focus on the neighborhood. Yet, often it has been found that progress in a neighborhood or village can infuse a new energy and optimism in endeavors across the rest of the cluster, providing a fresh impulse to its forward movement and to the process of community building under way in all areas.

11.58 As multiple activities are concentrated in the small, relatively cohesive areas of a neighborhood or village, the transformative impact of the spiritual and social forces at work are more readily noticed by the population at large. Parents see their children and youth progressing before their eyes and recognize that the social relations of their community have been imbued with a new spirit. Entire families are sometimes drawn to participate in the life of the Bahá'í community and embrace its teachings. And efforts are eventually “sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighborhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings”.³⁵

3.4 Identifying and Overcoming Obstacles to Sustained Progress

In hundreds of advanced clusters where intensive programs of growth were begun in the previous Plan, the believers achieved steady progress, enabling them to move beyond the second milestone towards the frontiers of learning. However, in hundreds of others, the friends encountered obstacles that significantly hindered their continued advance or even resulted in a decrease in participation and activity, requiring them to reflect upon and revise their approach in order to learn to overcome the difficulty. A review of some challenges and misconceptions that arose in such clusters may assist those who face similar problems to properly assess their situation and make the necessary adjustments in a timely manner. 11.59

In some cases, challenges arose as a result of an inability to establish one or another vital aspect of the framework for action. For example, in certain clusters the institute process had not taken root so the relationship between study and service intrinsic to the institute courses was not realized. Thus, rather than bringing about an organic process in which more and more individuals carry out more and more activities, a small number of believers became overwhelmed by increasing responsibilities. Only when the challenge of human resource development was resolved could the scope of endeavors expand. In other clusters, the friends readily enrolled new believers but struggled to help a significant number of them advance through the sequence of courses and enter a path of service. There were also those instances when the friends initiated many core activities among themselves, without giving due attention to teaching and inviting participants from the wider community. Reflection meetings sometimes 11.60

centered too much on planning or instruction rather than the opportunity to learn from experience and revise action accordingly.

11.61 Occasionally, when addressing new, emerging facets of an evolving program of growth, misunderstandings surfaced, or, in some cases, attention to a new aspect of the work led, inadvertently, to ignoring others. For example, in some places a dichotomy was perceived between collective teaching campaigns and the responsibility for personal teaching, when in reality, every act of teaching represents a response of the community to the Master's Divine Plan. Sometimes, a focus on neighborhoods was interpreted to mean that core activities drawing participants from different parts of a cluster should no longer be maintained. On occasion, there was a "tendency to confuse focus with uniformity or exclusivity",³⁶ leading either to an insistence on a single fixed approach or, conversely, to the idea that all individuals can establish any initiative they wish.

11.62 In the work of expansion and consolidation, the House of Justice has repeatedly observed that mistakes will inevitably be made and new challenges will present themselves. Obstacles, when they arise, are ultimately resolved through perseverance and further experience. Fruitless debate, insistence on personal views, creating false dichotomies, or the "tendency to reduce a complex process of transformation into simplistic steps, susceptible to instruction"³⁷ can be carefully avoided or wisely overcome. It is learning together that is yielding the insights necessary so that "stumbling blocks can be made stepping stones for progress".³⁸

3.5 Reaching Out to Youth in Receptive Populations

As discussed in section 1.2, the experience generated in many of the most advanced clusters has demonstrated the efficacy of a strategy that involves focused attention on enlisting young people from the wider society to serve in the community-building process. The same approach has been effective in establishing or strengthening intensive programs of growth. As stated in a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice: 11.63

By multiplying vibrant junior youth groups, a community learns a great deal about, for instance, how capable human resources are increased and deployed; how capacity for service is raised within cohorts of individuals; how an expanding program can be effectively coordinated; and how initiating one activity can, quite naturally, lead to the emergence of others. And as a consequence of the organic unfoldment of the educational process and the participants' ongoing spiritual and moral development, all facets of the growth program are, in time, extended and enhanced.³⁹ 11.64

In the Tuscany North-West cluster of Italy, the level of activity had reached a plateau and the veteran believers found it challenging to reach out to receptive youth. With the aid of the junior youth coordinator and teaching committee, a campaign focused on expanding the junior youth program in neighborhoods in the city of Livorno where the believers were interacting with a receptive population. Ten youths from around Italy spent three weeks in Livorno praying, studying, and preparing how to converse about the junior youth program. As a result of the campaign, 12 young people from the wider society participated in a two-week 11.65

intensive training in Books 1 and 5 to prepare to serve as animators. The experience of focusing on this particular age group in a receptive neighborhood changed the outlook of a community that had been struggling to increase participation in core activities. As two adult believers wrote, "We all feel that Livorno is no longer as before. There is a new awareness in the community, a new energy, a new vision." Almost every member of the local community is now engaged in the activities of the Plan, including some serving on a new Area Teaching Committee, others offering devotions in their homes for the new believers and seekers, and nearly all striving to reach out to youth. Similar experiences have emerged in all continents.

11.66 Not all the believers, of course, are able to work directly with junior youth groups, which may be largely concentrated in certain neighborhoods or villages in their cluster. Nevertheless, a sound knowledge of the program has proved to be invaluable for all those engaged in the work of the Plan, since the insights acquired help to shape the discourse with the wider community about the mission of the Faith to contribute to the betterment of the world. In the East Valley cluster in the United States, the friends serving in teaching teams and as animators concentrated for a period on learning how to effectively engage young people and their families from a receptive neighborhood in an elevated and effective conversation about the junior youth program. Over time, as their efforts bore fruit, this conversation began to spread to all the friends engaged in activities throughout the cluster, whether associated with the junior youth groups or not. This not only contributed to the multiplication of groups but also enriched the entire program of growth by helping the friends visualize and describe their efforts

in broader terms of community building and social transformation.

3.6 Enduring Fellowship

The "ethos of loving service"⁴⁰ fostered through the institute process becomes the animating spirit in clusters where encouragement and helpfulness are expressed through a deep commitment to accompanying one another in treading a path of service. This vital element in the emerging Bahá'í culture is manifested through the quality of the interactions among the friends. By working shoulder to shoulder, sharing in one another's joys and struggles, bonds of love and friendship are created that are the foundation for enduring fellowship. No structures or processes can make up for the spirit of loving fellowship if it does not exist. 11.67

Where faith in the capacity of others, a humble attitude of learning, mutual support and assistance, patience and forbearance, flexibility and generosity, and loving fellowship and encouragement are found, all the elements of the framework for action cohere and progress. As described by the House of Justice: "The operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes increasingly apparent, and bonds of friendship, so vital to a healthy pattern of growth, are continuously reinforced."⁴¹ 11.68

4. ENHANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO SUPPORT THE MOVEMENT OF CLUSTERS

The previous discussion in sections 1.4 and 3.2 concerning administrative arrangements highlighted how structures within clusters evolve in response to growth and an expanding framework of activity, accommodating ever greater complexity. This section will consider structures and processes at regional and national levels, 11.69

where institutions are striving “to create and refine mechanisms that serve to further the pattern of growth unfolding at the cluster level and the learning process associated with it”.⁴²

11.70 It should be noted that, despite significant evolution in the scheme of coordination in the first two years of the current Plan, it is premature to define a specific pattern to be followed everywhere as clusters move towards the frontiers of learning. More experience is required, and additional guidance must be provided over time by the Universal House of Justice. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the insights about administrative structures and processes offered in this section of the document, although preliminary in nature, will assist institutions in various countries and regions to keep pace with the complexity associated with the movement of increasing numbers of clusters along the continuum of development.

4.1 Training Institutes

11.71 There are some 300 training institutes worldwide, about a third of which operate at the regional level. Some of these agencies have already grown to become sizeable and complex organizations, with scores of full- and part-time coordinators and their helpers maintaining hundreds of activities involving thousands of participants. For many years, most of the work of the institute, including overseeing both administrative matters and the development of the programs, fell on national or regional coordinators. While the responsibilities of these coordinators continue to be important, and indeed have only become more complex as the scope of the activity of institutes has been extended to thousands of additional clusters, it has been necessary to bring institute boards more fully into operation as well.

National Assemblies or Regional Councils, in consultation with Counsellors, appoint to institute boards individuals who have had direct involvement in serving as tutors, animators, children’s class teachers, or former coordinators and are familiar with the institute’s structure. A sound understanding of the relationship between human resource development and sustained growth is also required. With such a reservoir of experience, boards are increasingly taking responsibility for formulating annual plans and budgets, organizing periodic reflection gatherings with coordinators, facilitating the flow of funds, and collaborating with other institutions. The board also needs to regularly engage with the Counsellors and their auxiliaries and have a close, collaborative relationship with the Regional Council or, in its absence, with the National Assembly itself, through frequent communication and occasional joint meetings. 11.72

A primary consideration of the board and all the institutions that support the institute is the scheme of coordination and how the coordinators at all levels can be accompanied in their service. National and regional coordinators support a growing number of cluster coordinators by periodically bringing them together in gatherings for sharing experience and by visiting them in the field to support their day-to-day operations. They also ensure that resources such as funds and materials reach clusters in a timely manner, and cluster coordinators are engaged in a collaborative interaction with other agencies and institutions. Where activity is under way in a significant number of clusters, it may even be necessary to provide for the organization of the work of coordinators into subregions. Whatever the particular structure suited to the conditions of a region, there must be a variety of occasions that bring together friends serving as coordinators to learn from one another’s 11.73

experience, explore new guidance, and reflect upon and revise their plans of action.

11.74 A number of attitudes and abilities are essential to foster in coordinators at all levels: deep understanding and appreciation of the nature, purpose, and methods of the training institute; commitment to the community-building process; recognition of the need to nurture the potential of others; dedication to learning; a collaborative spirit; and a readiness to support others and be supported by them in adhering to a Bahá'í way of life. Experience in recent years clearly indicates that coordinators will need to be allowed to serve for a few years in order for the required capacity to be built, and creative means will have to be developed to enable them to devote a period of their lives to this field of endeavor, perhaps, in the case of the youth, in conjunction with their continuing education.

4.2 Learning Sites for the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment program

11.75 As described earlier, the systematic process for learning about the junior youth spiritual empowerment program has lent impetus to growth and community building in general. A formal structure for this learning process emerged during the previous Five Year Plan when a number of clusters with significant advances in the implementation of the junior youth program were designated as sites for the dissemination of learning. Now numbering more than forty, at different stages of development, these learning sites and the resource persons associated with them support a network of approximately ten clusters each. Among these nearly 400 clusters are virtually all of the most advanced clusters in the world. Now a critical component of the institutional framework to advance community building,

this structure for systematic learning is proving to be an invaluable resource for Counsellors and their auxiliaries, National Assemblies, Regional Councils, and training institutes. The House of Justice explained:

The areas of learning at these sites, and in their associated clusters, have included the capacity of animators, the dynamics of junior youth groups, and the scheme of coordination that supports the development of the program among diverse populations; this learning is then shared with the training institutes. The effectiveness of the program is vastly enhanced as resource persons serving the learning sites conduct training seminars and work closely with cluster coordinators in their efforts to increase the number of animators and junior youth groups.⁴³ 11.76

4.3 Regional Bahá'í Councils

Bearing the primary responsibility at this time "for overseeing the execution of the Five Year Plan in the territories under their jurisdiction,"⁴⁴ Regional Councils recognize that their overarching task is to ensure the movement of clusters along a rich and dynamic continuum of development, from supporting those where the first stirrings of the growth process are evident to strengthening those that are advancing the frontiers of learning. This is achieved through the Councils' assistance to the institutions, agencies, and believers at the cluster level, in addition to their work with the training institute. 11.77

As part of their responsibility, Regional Councils ensure "the timely appearance and dynamic functioning of Area Teaching Committees".⁴⁵ During the last Five Year Plan, Councils gained a great deal of experience in fostering the effective functioning of Area Teaching Committees through gatherings for 11.78

orientation, consultation, and planning, as well as visits by the Council Secretary or other friends designated to follow the work of the Committees and the progress of clusters. In addition to assessing the strengths and challenges in each cluster, the objective of these interactions was to focus on building capacity in the Committees, particularly in their secretaries. Another fruitful practice has been a periodic meeting for reflection by key individuals at the regional level, once every three or six months, to assess how the Area Teaching Committees are being supported and how they are contributing to the development of the clusters. Such meetings have included the Secretary of the Council, the Counsellor or Auxiliary Board members, regional institute coordinators, and other members of the Council or staff charged with following the movement of clusters.

11.79 Along with their responsibilities in the field, Regional Councils are carrying out an array of administrative duties. They are trying to put into place efficient systems and mechanisms to ensure the flow of funds, information, learning, and human resources, such as pioneers. The scope of the work of Council Secretaries, which includes overseeing administrative and field operations and, in some cases, properties, is increasing, requiring many to devote hours equivalent to full-time service. In order to manage the wide range of tasks, well-functioning offices with support staff are emerging.

5. SOCIETY-BUILDING POWER OF THE FAITH

11.80 Over many decades, generations of Bahá'ís have striven to apply the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh to their individual and collective lives. Inspired always by the distant vision of a new World Order and a divine civilization, the believers have pressed on and consecrated

themselves to achieving the goals of successive global Plans. This vision of a world civilization, as Shoghi Effendi wrote, is one that “no mortal eye hath ever beheld or human mind conceived”.⁴⁶ Referring to the endeavor of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, who at the time were few in number, he stated:

Conscious of their high calling, confident in the society-building power which their Faith possesses, they press forward, undeterred and undismayed, in their efforts to fashion and perfect the necessary instruments wherein the embryonic World Order of Bahá'u'lláh can mature and develop.⁴⁷ 11.81

The transformative and constructive powers inherent in the Faith are gradually becoming manifest in advanced clusters where Bahá'ís are working alongside their neighbors in a collective process and, through social action and participation in countless conversations, are learning to respond to the heightened social consciousness that springs in a natural way from intensive engagement in the core activities. The House of Justice has observed: 11.82

An especially notable feature of the last twelve months has been the frequency with which the Bahá'í community is being identified, in a wide variety of contexts, with efforts to bring about the betterment of society in collaboration with like-minded people. From the international arena to the grassroots of village life, leaders of thought in all kinds of settings have expressed their awareness that not only do Bahá'ís have the welfare of humanity at heart, but they possess a cogent conception of what needs to be accomplished and effective means for realizing their aspirations.⁴⁸ 11.83

The Bahá'í community is now more able than ever before to advance “the manifold and diverse 11.84

dimensions of civilization building".⁴⁹ In contemplating the complexity of the process and the recurring challenges that lie ahead, there is no doubt that "endeavour, ceaseless endeavour, is required",⁵⁰ as the Master described the task of establishing "true civilization".⁵¹ At the same time, mindful of the countless expressions of Bahá'u'lláh's divine love and evidences of His all-conquering power in their lives, the friends press forward, labouring "serenely, confidently, and unremittingly"⁵² to contribute their talents and energies, no matter where they reside, to those efforts that are "conducive to the regeneration of the world and the salvation of the peoples and kindreds of the earth".⁵³

Endnotes

- 1 Riḍván 2013 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- 2 Message dated 12 December 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies.
- 3 Riḍván 2013 message.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Riḍván 2010 message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- 8 From an unpublished Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.
- 9 Message dated 12 December 2011.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Message dated 27 December 2005 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.
- 12 Riḍván 2013 message.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Message dated 28 December 2010 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.
- 15 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 16 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 17 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 20 Message dated 23 May 2011 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- 21 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 22 Ibid.

- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 25 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Letter dated 9 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.
- 34 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Message dated 27 December 2005.
- 37 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Letter dated 14 November 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.
- 40 Message dated 28 December 2010.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Letter dated 7 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of Germany.
- 44 Letter dated 23 January 2011 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the Local Spiritual Assemblies of Colombes and Courbevoie, France.
- 45 Letter dated 9 August 2012 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

- 46 Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2009 printing), p. 206.
- 47 Ibid., p. 195.
- 48 Riḍván 2013 message.
- 49 Riḍván 2010 message.
- 50 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990, 1999 printing), p. 66.
- 51 Ibid., p. 81.
- 52 Riḍván 153 [1996] message written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world.
- 53 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988, 1992 printing), p. 223.