

community. In this regard, the Institutions of the Faith stand as channels for the promotion of this salient characteristic. It is in this framework that the concepts of rulership and leadership, authority and power are properly understood and actualized.

The appearance of a united, firmly based and self-sustaining community must be a major goal of a Spiritual Assembly. Composed of a membership reflecting a diversity of personalities, talents, abilities and interests, such a community requires a level of internal interaction between the Assembly and in which a sense of partnership based on appreciation of each other's distinctive sphere of action is fully recognized and unfailingly upheld, and no semblance of a dichotomy between the two appears. In such a community leadership is that expression of service by which the Spiritual Assembly invites and encourages the use of the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed, and stimulates and guides the diverse elements of the community towards goals and strategies by which the effects of a coherent force for progress can be realized.

The maintenance of a climate of love and unity depends largely upon the feeling among the individuals composing the community that the Assembly is a part of themselves, that their cooperative interactions with that divinely ordained body allow them a fair latitude for initiative and that the quality of their relationships with both the institution and their fellow believers encourages a spirit of enterprise invigorated by an awareness of the revolutionizing purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, by a consciousness of the high privilege of their being associated with efforts to realize that purpose, and by a consequent, ever-present sense of joy. In such a climate, the community is transformed from being the mere sum of its parts to assuming a wholly new personality as an entity in which its members blend without losing their individual uniqueness. The possibilities for manifesting such a transformation exist most immediately at the local level, but it is a major responsibility of the National Assembly to nurture the conditions in which they may flourish.

The authority to direct the affairs of the Faith locally, nationally and internationally, is divinely conferred on elected institutions. However, the power to accomplish the tasks of the community resides primarily in the mass of the believers. The authority of the institutions is an irrevocable necessity for the progress of humanity; its exercise is an art to be mastered. The power of action in the believers is unlocked at the level of individual initiative and surges at level of collective volition. In its potential, this mass power, this mix of individual potentialities, exists in a malleable form susceptible to the multiple reactions of individuals to the sundry influences at work in the world. To realize its highest purpose, this power needs to express itself through orderly avenues of activity. Even though individuals may strive to be guided in their actions by their personal understanding of the Divine Texts, and much can be accomplished thereby, such actions, untempered by the overall direction provided by authorized institutions, are incapable of attaining the thrust necessary for the unencumbered advancement of civilization.

Individual initiative is a pre-eminent aspect of this power; it is therefore a major responsibility of the institutions to safeguard and stimulate it. Similarly, it is important for individuals to recognize and accept that the institutions must act as a guiding and moderating influence on the march of civilization. In this sense, the divine requirement that individuals obey the decisions of their Assemblies can clearly be seen as being indispensable to the progress of society. Indeed, individuals must not be abandoned entirely to their own devices with respect to the welfare of society as a whole, neither should they be stifled by the assumption of a dictatorial posture by members of the institutions.

The successful exercise of authority in the Bahá'í community implies the recognition of separate mutually reinforcing rights and responsibilities between the institutions and the friends in general, a recognition that in turn welcomes the need for cooperation between these two interactive forces of society. As was stated in advice given by Shoghi Effendi: "The individuals and assemblies must learn to cooperate intelligently, if they desire to adequately discharge their duties and obligations towards the Faith. And no such cooperation is possible without mutual confidence and trust." ...

As to your worry about over-controlling the friends: by appreciating the nature of the power of action which they possess, you will be able to gauge how best to guide and direct them. A wide latitude for action must be allowed them, which means a large margin for mistakes must also be allowed. Your National Assembly and the Local Assemblies must not react automatically to every mistake, but distinguish between those that are self-correcting with the passage of time and do no particular harm to the community and those which require Assembly intervention. Related to this is the tendency of the friends to criticize each other at the slightest provocation, whereas the Teachings call upon them to encourage each other. Such tendencies are of course motivated by a deep love for the Faith, a desire to see it free of any flaw. But human beings are not perfect. The Local Assemblies and the friends must be helped through your example and through loving counsel to refrain from such a criticism, which stunts the growth and development of the community.

...At this exact time history when the peoples of the world are weighed with soul-crushing difficulties and the shadow of despair threatens to eclipse the light of hope, there must be revived among the individual believers a sense of mission, a feeling of empowerment to minister to the urgent need of humanity for guidance and thus win victories for the Faith in their own sphere of life. The community as a whole should be involved in efforts to resolve such issues. A single answer would, of course, be inadequate, there being so many diverse elements and interests in the community. These matters require not only your own independent consultation with the Counsellors as well. Although Spiritual Assemblies are good at specifying goals, they have not yet mastered the art of making use of the talents of individuals and rousing the mass of the friends to action in fulfillment of such goals. Removing this deficiency would be a mark of the maturation of these institutions...

Now is the time for the friends to seize new opportunities to extend the range and influence of the Faith, to reach a new level of action in expanding the community and fortifying its foundations. It is indeed time for audacious action undeterred by a year of mistakes, fired by the urgency of ministering to the pressing needs of humanity.

B. EXPLORATION OF THEMES

I.

"...the spirit of servitude to God" - The Importance of Individual Initiative

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

Arise ye, under all conditions, to render service to the Cause, for God will assuredly assist you through the power of His sovereignty which overshadoweth the worlds.

(The Kitab-i-Aqdas, p.

46

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This is not a Cause which may be made a plaything for your idle fancies, nor is it a field for the foolish and faint of heart. By God, 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. These, truly, are they that render God victorious on earth, and are the dawning-places of His sovereign might amidst mankind.

(The Kitab-i-Aqdas, p.

84

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Gird up the loins of thine endeavor, that haply thou mayest guide thy neighbor to the law of God, the Most Merciful. Such an act, verily, excelleth all other acts in the sight of God, the All-Possessing, the Most High. Such must be thy steadfastness in the Cause of God, that no earthly thing whatsoever will have the power to deter thee from thy duty. Though the powers of earth be leagued against thee, though all men dispute with thee, thou must remain unshaken.

Be unrestrained as the wind, while carrying the Message of Him Who hath caused the Dawn of Divine Guidance to break. Consider, how the wind, faithful to that which God hath ordained, bloweth upon all the regions of the earth, be they inhabited or desolate. Neither the sight of desolation, nor the evidences of prosperity, can either pain or please it. It bloweth in every direction, as bidden by its Creator. So should be every one that claimeth to be a lover of the one true God. It behoveth him to fix his gaze upon the fundamentals of His Faith, and to labor diligently for its propagation.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, sec.

CLXI

, p.
339
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This servant appealeth to every diligent and enterprising soul to exert his utmost endeavour and arise to rehabilitate the conditions in all regions and to quicken the dead with the living waters of wisdom and utterance, by virtue of the love he cherisheth for God, the One, the Peerless, the Almighty, the Beneficent.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas , p.
172
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From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá

...it is incumbent upon... all the friends and loved ones, one and all to bestir themselves and arise with heart and soul and in one accord, to diffuse the sweet savors of God, to teach His Cause and to promote His Faith. It behooveth them not to rest for a moment, neither to seek repose. They must disperse themselves in every land, pass by every clime, and travel throughout all regions...

In these days, the most important of all things is the guidance of the nations and peoples of the world. Teaching the Cause is of utmost importance for it is the head corner-stone of the foundation itself. This wronged servant has spent his days and nights in promoting the Cause and urging the peoples to service. He rested not a moment, till the fame of the Cause of God was noised abroad in the world and the celestial strains from the Abhá Kingdom roused the East and the West. The beloved of God must also follow the same example. This is the secret of faithfulness, this is the requirement of servitude to the Threshold of Bahá!

The disciples of Christ forgot themselves and all earthly things, forsook all their cares and belongings, purged themselves of self and passion, and with absolute detachment scattered far and wide and engaged in calling the peoples of the world to the divine guidance; till at last they made the world another world, illumined the surface of the earth, and even to their last hour proved self-sacrificing in the pathway of that beloved One of God. Finally in various lands they suffered glorious martyrdom. Let them that are men of action follow in their footsteps!

(Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá, pp.
10
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11
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The teaching work should under all conditions be actively pursued by the believers because divine confirmations are dependent upon it. Should a Bahá'í

refrain from being fully, vigorously and wholeheartedly involved in the teaching work he will undoubtedly be deprived of the blessings of the Abhá Kingdom. Even so, this activity should be tempered with wisdom--not that wisdom which requireth one to be silent and forgetful of such an obligation, but rather that which requireth one to display divine tolerance, love, kindness, patience, a goodly character, and holy deeds. In brief, encourage the friends individually to teach the Cause of God and draw their attention to this meaning of wisdom mentioned in the Writings, which is itself the essence of teaching the Faith--but all this to be done with the greatest tolerance, so that heavenly assistance and divine confirmation may aid the friends.

(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p.

268

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Wherefore, O ye friends of God, redouble your efforts, strain every nerve, till ye triumph in your servitude to the Ancient Beauty, the Manifest Light, and become the cause of spreading far and wide the rays of the Day-Star of Truth...

Expend your every breath of life in this great Cause and dedicate all your days to the service of Bahá, so that in the end, safe from loss and deprivation, ye will inherit the heaped-up treasures of the realms above. For the days of a man are full of peril and he cannot rely on so much as a moment more of life...

Wherefore, rest ye neither day nor night and seek no ease. Tell ye the secrets of servitude, follow the pathway of service, till ye attain the promised succour that cometh from the realms of God.

(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá a, p.

271

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From Letters Written by and on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

To teach the Cause of God, to proclaim its truths, to defend its interests, to demonstrate, by words as well as by deeds, its indispensability, its potency, and universality, should at no time be regarded as the exclusive concern or sole privilege of Bahá'í administrative institutions, be they Assemblies, or committees. All must participate, however humble their origin, however limited their experience, however restricted their means, however deficient their education, however pressing their cares and preoccupations, however unfavorable the environment in which they live.

(The Advent of Divine Justice, p.

45

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It is the bounden duty of every American believer... to initiate, promote, and consolidate, within the limits fixed by the administrative principles of the Faith, any activity he or she deems fit to undertake for the furtherance of the Plan...Let him not wait for any directions, or expect any special

encouragement, from the elected representatives of his community, nor be deterred by any obstacles which his relatives, or fellow-citizens may be inclined to place in his path, nor mind the censure of his critics or enemies.

(The Advent of Divine Justice, p.

50

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This challenge, so severe and insistent, and yet so glorious, faces no doubt primarily the individual believer on whom, in the last resort, depends the fate of the entire community. He it is who constitutes the warp and woof on which the quality and pattern of the whole fabric must depend. He it is who acts as one of the countless links in the mighty chain that now girdles the globe. He it is who serves as one of the multitude of bricks which support the structure and insure the stability of the administrative edifice now being raised in every part of the world. Without his support, at once whole-hearted, continuous and generous, every measure adopted, and every plan formulated, by the body which acts as the national representative of the community to which he belongs, is foredoomed to failure. The World Center of the Faith itself is paralyzed if such a support on the part of the rank and file of the community is denied it. The Author of the Divine Plan Himself is impeded in His purpose if the proper instruments for the execution of His design are lacking. The sustaining strength of Bahá'u'lláh Himself, the Founder of the Faith, will be withheld from every and each individual who fails in the long run to arise and play his part.

(Citadel of Faith, p.

130

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The Guardian feels that, if the friends would meditate a little more objectively upon both their relationship to the Cause and the vast non-Bahá'í public they hope to influence, they would see things more clearly.

...the condition that the world is in, is bringing many issues to a head. It would be impossible to find a nation or people not in a state of crisis today. The materialism, the lack of true religion and the consequent baser forces in human nature which are being released, have brought the whole world to the brink of probably the greatest crisis it has ever faced or will have to face. The Bahá'ís are a part of the world. They too feel the great pressures which are brought to bear upon all people today, wherever and wherever they may be. On the other hand, the Divine Plan, which is the direct method of working toward the establishment of peace and world order, has perforce reached an important and challenging point in its unfoldment; because of the desperate needs of the world, the Bah*ís find themselves, even though so limited in numbers, in financial strength and in prestige, called upon to fulfil a great responsibility...Each one must evaluate what his own response can be and should

be; nobody can do this for him.... He fully realizes that the demands made upon the Bahá'ís are great, and that they often feel inadequate, tired and perhaps frightened in the face of the tasks that confront them. This is only natural. On the other hand, they must realize that the power of God can and will assist them; and that because they are privileged to have accepted the Manifestation of God for this Day, this very act has placed upon them a great moral responsibility toward their fellow-men.

(19 July 1956, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

From Letters of the Universal House of Justice

What is needed is the awakening of all believers to the immediacy of the challenge so that each may assume his share of the responsibility for taking the Teachings to all humanity. Universal participation...must be pressed toward attainment in every continent, country and island of the globe. Every Bahá'í, however humble or inarticulate, must become intent on fulfilling his role as a bearer of the Divine Message. Indeed, how can a true believer remain silent while around us men cry out in anguish for truth, love and unity to descend upon this world?

(16 November 1969, published in Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1968-1973, p.

34

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Every individual believer - man, woman, youth and child - is summoned to this field of action; for it is on the initiative, the resolute will of the individual to teach and to serve, that the success of the entire community depends. Well-grounded in the mighty Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, sustained by daily prayer and reading of the Holy Word, strengthened by a continual striving to obtain a deeper understanding of the divine Teachings, illumined by a constant endeavour to relate these Teachings to current issues, nourished by observance of the laws and principles of His wondrous World Order, every individual can attain increasing measures of success in teaching. In sum, the ultimate triumph of the Cause is assured by that "one thing and only one thing" so poignantly emphasized by Shoghi Effendi, namely, "the extent to which our inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendour of those eternal principles proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh".

(

Ridván 1988

to the Bahá'ís of the World)

Our appeal for immediate, redoubled and sustained action on all aspects of the Plan is addressed primarily to the individual believer of every locality, who possesses within himself or herself the measures of initiative that ensure the success of any global Bahá'í enterprise, and "on whom, in the last resort," as our beloved Guardian plainly stated, "depends the fate of the entire community".

(
Ridván 1993
to the Bahá'ís of the World)

II.

"...a sense of partnership" - The Individual
and the Spiritual Assembly

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

In all things it is necessary to consult.... The intent of what hath been revealed from the Pen of then Most High is that consultation may be fully carried out among the friends, inasmuch as it is and will always be a cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being.

(From a Tablet, translated from the Persian, in Consultation: A Compilation, extract 5

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From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá

"It is incumbent upon every one not to take any step without consulting the Spiritual Assembly, and they must assuredly obey with heart and soul its bidding and be submissive unto it, that things may be properly ordered and well arranged. Otherwise every person will act independently and after his own judgment, will follow his own desire, and do harm to the Cause."

(Cited in Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, p.

21

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From Letters Written by and on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Theirs [the members of the National Spiritual Assembly] is the duty to purge once for all their deliberations and the general conduct of their affairs from that air of self-contained aloofness, from the suspicion of secrecy, the stifling atmosphere of dictatorial assertiveness, in short, from every word and deed that might savor of partiality, self-centeredness and prejudice. Theirs is the duty, while retaining the sacred and exclusive right of final decision in their hands, to invite discussion, provide information, ventilate grievances, welcome advice from even the most humble and insignificant members of the Bahá'í family, expose their motives, set forth their plans, justify their actions, revise if necessary their verdict, foster the sense of interdependence and co-partnership, of understanding and mutual confidence between them on one hand and all local Assemblies and individual believers on the other.

(18 October 1927, published in Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, pp.

143

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The principle of consultation, which constitutes one of the basic laws of the Administration, should be applied to all Bahá'í activities which affect the collective interests of the Faith, for it is through co-operation and continual exchange of thoughts and views that the Cause can best safeguard and foster its interests. Individual initiative, personal ability and resourcefulness, though indispensable, are, unless supported and enriched by the collective experiences and wisdom of the group, utterly incapable of achieving such a tremendous task.

(30 August 1933, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

There is no task more urgently necessary than the assurance of perfect harmony and fellowship among the friends, especially between the Local Assemblies and individual believers. The Local Assemblies should inspire confidence in the individual believers, and these in their turn should express their readiness to fully abide by the decisions and directions of the Local Assembly. The two must learn to co-operate, and to realize that only through such a co-operation can the institutions of the Cause effectively and permanently function. While that body should enforce its decisions in such a way as to avoid giving impression that it is animated by dictatorial motives. The spirit of the Cause is one of mutual co-operation, and not that of a dictatorship.

(28 October 1935, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Let every participator in the continent-wide campaign...bear in mind the necessity of keeping in close and constant touch with those responsible agencies designed to direct, coordinate, and facilitate the teaching activities of the entire community.

(25 December 1938, Advent of Divine Justice, p.

52

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From Letters of the Universal House of Justice

Unity of mankind is the pivotal principle of His Revelation; Bahá'í communities must therefore become renowned for their demonstration of this unity. In a world becoming daily more divided by factionalism and group interests, the Bahá'í community must be distinguished by the concord and harmony of its relationships. The coming of age of the human race must be foreshadowed by the mature, responsible understanding of human problems and the wise administration of their affairs by these same Bahá'í communities. The practice and development of such Bahá'í characteristics are the responsibility alike of individual Bahá'ís and administrative institutions....

(

Naw-Ruz 1974

to the Bahá'ís of the World)

The proper functioning of these institutions depends largely on the efforts of their members to familiarize themselves with their duties and to adhere scrupulously to principle in their personal behaviour and in the conduct of their official responsibilities. Of relevant importance, too, are their resolve to remove all traces of estrangement and sectarian tendencies from their midst, their ability to win the affection and support of the friends under their care and to involve as many individuals as possible in the work of the Cause. By their constantly aiming at improving their performance, the communities they guide will reflect a pattern of life that will be a credit to the Faith and will, as a welcome consequence, rekindle hope among the increasingly disillusioned members of society.

(
Ridvan 1993
to the Bahá'ís of the World)

III.

"...the power of action" - The Role of the
Institutions of the Faith

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

The Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice be established wherein shall gather counsellors to the number of Bahá, and should it exceed this number it doth not matter. They should consider themselves as entering the Court of the presence of God, the Exalted, the Most High, and as beholding Him Who is the Unseen. It behoveth them to be the trusted ones of the Merciful among men and to regard themselves as the guardians appointed of God for all that dwell on earth. It is incumbent upon them to take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God, for His sake, even as they regard their own interests, and to choose that which is meet and seemly.

(The Kitab-i-Aqdas, p.
29
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From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá

These Spiritual Assemblies are 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. They, indeed, are the potent sources of the progress of man, at all times and under all conditions.

(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p.
80
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From Letters Written by and on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

It is the duty and privilege of the National and Local Assemblies ...to

initiate and conduct, with their knowledge and consent, any undertaking that would serve to enhance the work which they have set themselves to achieve...they should, by every means in their power, stimulate the spirit of enterprise among the believers in order to further the teaching as well as the administrative work of the Cause. They should endeavor by personal contact and written appeals, to imbue the body of the faithful with a deep sense of personal responsibility, and urge every believer, whether high or low, poor or wealthy, to conceive, formulate and execute such measures and projects as would redound, in the eyes of their representatives, to the power and the fair name of this sacred Cause.

(20 February 1927, in Bahá'í Administration, p.

128

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The work of the Assembly should be to capitalize the energy and devotion that exists among the friends and guide them along proper channels, whereby good work would be accomplished and no harm be done to the Cause. The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers.

(30 August 1930, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

The National Spiritual Assembly, and all the national committees as well, would welcome all suggestions of this sort which individual believers feel prompted to make in order to open new ways and adopt fresh methods for the spread and the consolidation of the Cause.

(4 June 1934, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

When the National Spiritual Assembly provides competent and quick service, in its own work and that of its Committees, it will see a far greater manifestation of enthusiasm and enterprise on the part of the believers.

(28 March 1945, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Your Committee must encourage all the believers to teach, and try and constantly devise new and stimulating suggestions to offer to the friends of ways in which they can help - for the Guardian knows that all the friends are keenly concerned over the state of society, and anxious, every one of them, to take an active part in counteracting the wave of materialism, bitterness and selfishness which is sweeping over the world.

(30 December 1945, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Teaching Committee)

...he considers that National Assemblies must strongly guard against this marked tendency of laying down new rules and regulations all the time, which he considers unnecessary and injurious. In the end it will dampen the zeal and quench the spontaneity of the believers, and give the impression that the

Bahá'í Faith is crystallizing into set forms. Principles there must be, but they must be applied with wisdom to each case that arises, not every case covered, before it arises, by a codified set of rules. This is the whole spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's system: rigid conformity to great essential laws, elasticity, and even a certain necessary element of diversity, in secondary matters.

(18 May 1948, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

The difficulties, and the evidences of immaturity, which you mention in your letter...seem to be an inevitable phase in the growth of our Administration, which is so much more perfect than the believers called upon to create it! There are bound to be many misunderstandings, and some small abuses, in erecting a system which is so different from the ways men are used to. But mother looks upon the mistakes of her children, realizing that with maturity will come the capacity to handle situations better and with more sound judgement.

(23 October 1949, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

He hopes your Assembly will devote special, constant attention to encouraging the friends in their teaching work, and facilitate their tasks. As the new National Assemblies are being formed, he feels it incumbent upon him to issue a word of warning to avoid rules and regulations and tying the believers work up in red tape. Over-administration can be even worse for the Faith at this time than under-administration. The believers are, for the most part, young in the Cause, and if they make mistakes it is not half as important as if their spirit is crushed by being told all the time - do this and don't do that! The new National Body should be like a loving parent, watching over and helping its children, and not like a stern judge, waiting for an opportunity to display his judicial powers....

The friends should be helped to overcome their problems, deepen in the Faith, and increase their unity and their love for each other. In this way you will find that your work goes ahead speedily, and that the National Body is like the beating of a healthy heart in the midst of the Community, pumping spiritual love, energy and encouragement out to all members.

(30 June 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual Assembly)

He urges your Assembly, as it embarks upon its great work, to refrain from introducing rules and regulations which serve no useful purpose at this time when the communities are small and undeveloped, and will only stifle the spirit of the friends and confuse them. Like a wise and loving parent the Assembly should conduct the affairs of the Bahá'ís, constantly and patiently, encouraging them and instilling enthusiasm for the work to be done.

(29 July 1957, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a National Spiritual

Assembly)

From Letters of the Universal House of Justice

It is at this local level of Bahá'í community life, the very foundation of the administrative structure of the Faith, that we so often find lack of adequate strength and efficiency. It is at this same level that our beloved Guardian urged Auxiliary Members to establish contact with Local Spiritual Assemblies, groups, isolated centres and the individual believers, and through periodic and systematic visits to localities as well as by correspondence help in promoting the interests of the Plan, assist in the efficient and prompt execution of the goals, watch over the security of the Faith, stimulate and strengthen the teaching and pioneer work, impress upon the friends the importance of individual effort, initiative and sacrifice, and encourage them to participate in Bahá'í activities and be unified under all circumstances.

(17 November 1971 to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, in The Local Spiritual Assembly, extract

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The divinely ordained institution of the Local Spiritual Assembly operates at the first levels of human society and is the basic administrative unit of Bahá'u'lláh's World Order. It is concerned with individuals and families whom it must constantly encourage to unite in a distinctive Bahá'í society, vitalized and guarded by the laws, ordinances and principles of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. It protects the Cause of God; it acts as the loving shepherd of the Bahá'í flock.

(

Naw-Ruz 1974

to the Bahá'ís of the World)

Bahá'í women and girls must be encouraged to take part in the social, spiritual and administrative activities of their communities. Bahá'í youth, now rendering exemplary and devoted service in the forefront of the army of life, must be encouraged, even while equipping themselves for future service, to devise and execute their own teaching plans among their contemporaries.

(

Ridvan 1984

to the Bahá'ís of the World)

An expansion of thought and action in certain aspects of our work would enhance our possibilities for success in meeting our aforementioned commitments. Since change, ever more rapid change, is a constant characteristic of life at this time, and since our growth, size and external relations demand much of us, our community must be ready to adapt. In a sense this means that the community must become more adept at accommodating a wide range of actions without losing concentration on the primary objectives of teaching, namely, expansion and consolidation. A unity in diversity of actions is called for, a condition in

which different individuals will concentrate on different activities, appreciating the salutary effect of the aggregate on the growth and development of the Faith, because each person cannot do everything and all persons cannot do the same thing. This understanding is important to the maturity which, by the many demands being made upon it, the community is being forced to attain.

(
Ridvan 1990
to the Bahá'ís of the World)

Training of the friends and their striving, through serious individual study, to acquire knowledge of the Faith, to apply its principles and administer its affairs, are indispensable to developing the human resources necessary to the progress of the Cause. But knowledge alone is not adequate; it is vital that training be given in a manner that inspires love and devotion, fosters firmness in the Covenant, prompts the individual to active participation in the work of the Cause and to taking sound initiatives in the promotion of its interests. Special efforts to attract people of capacity to the Faith will also go far towards providing the human resources so greatly needed at this time.

(
Ridvan 1993
to the Bahá'ís of the World)

The human resources of the Cause are being augmented in two ways. People of capacity are being moved to embrace the Faith, reinforcing the ranks of those who are already serving...In the year ahead these two complementary processes -- attracting people of capacity and increasing our own abilities -- must be further advanced, stimulating individual action and the harmonious development of a wide range of activities for the promotion of the Faith.

As the potentialities of the individual believers unfold, so the local and national Bahá'í institutions are gaining ability to foster the quality of the life of their communities and to conceive and implement imaginative programmes.

(
Ridvan 1994
to the Bahá'ís of the World)

IV.

"...a climate of love and unity" - The Role
of the Bahá'í Community

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

With the utmost unity, and in a spirit of perfect fellowship, exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God. Verily I say, strife and dissension, and whatsoever the mind of man abhorreth are entirely unworthy of his station. Center your energies in the propagation of the Faith of God.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p.

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It is Our wish and desire that every one of you may become a source of all goodness unto men, and an example of uprightness to mankind. Beware lest ye prefer yourselves above your neighbors. Fix your gaze upon Him Who is the Temple of God amongst men. He, in truth, hath offered up His life as a ransom for the redemption of the world. He, verily, is the All-Bountiful, the Gracious, the Most High. If any differences arise amongst you, behold Me standing before your face, and overlook the faults of one another for My name's sake and as a token of your love for My manifest and resplendent Cause. We love to see you at all times consorting in amity and concord within the paradise of My good-pleasure, and to inhale from your acts the fragrance of friendliness and unity, of loving-kindness and fellowship.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p.

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They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations. Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindliness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p.

36

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O ye beloved of the Lord! Commit not that which defileth the limpid stream of love or destroyeth the sweet fragrance of friendship. By the righteousness of the Lord! Ye were created to show love one to another and not perversity and rancour. Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow-creatures. Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind. Let your eye be chaste, your hand faithful, your tongue truthful and your heart enlightened. Abase not the station of the learned in Bahá and belittle not the rank of such rulers as administer justice amidst you. Set your reliance on the army of justice, put on the armour of wisdom, let your adorning be forgiveness and mercy and that which cheereth the hearts of the well-favoured of God.

(Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp.

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From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá

Strive ye by day and night to cultivate your unity to the fullest degree. Let your thoughts dwell on your own spiritual development, and close your eyes to the deficiencies of other souls. Act ye in such wise, showing forth pure and goodly deeds, and modesty and humility, that ye will cause others to be awakened.

Never is it the wish of `Abdu'l-Bahá to see any being hurt, nor will He make anyone to grieve; for man can receive no greater gift than this, that he rejoice another's heart. I beg of God that ye will be bringers of joy, even as are the angels in Heaven.

(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, pp.

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O beloved of the Lord! If any soul speak ill of an absent one, the only result will clearly be this: he will dampen the zeal of the friends and tend to make them indifferent. For backbiting is divisive, it is the leading cause among the friends of a disposition to withdraw. If any individual should speak ill of one who is absent, it is incumbent on his hearers, in a spiritual and friendly manner, to stop him, and say in effect: would this detraction serve any useful purpose? Would it please the Blessed Beauty, contribute to the lasting honour of the friends, promote the holy Faith, support the Covenant, or be of any possible benefit to any soul? No, never! On the contrary, it would make the dust to settle so thickly on the heart that the ears would hear no more, and the eyes would no longer behold the light of truth.

If, however, a person setteth about speaking well of another, opening his lips to praise another, he will touch an answering chord in his hearers and they will be stirred up by the breathings of God. Their hearts and souls will rejoice to know that, God be thanked, here is a soul in the Faith who is a focus of human perfections, a very embodiment of the bounties of the Lord, one whose tongue is eloquent, and whose face shineth, in whatever gathering he may be, one who hath victory upon his brow, and who is a being sustained by the sweet savours of God.

(Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, pp.

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From Letters Written by and on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

Not by merely imitating the excesses and laxity of the extravagant age they live in; not by the idle neglect of the sacred responsibilities it is their privilege to shoulder; not by the silent compromise of the principles dearly cherished by `Abdu'l-Bahá; not by their fear or unpopularity or their dread of

censure can they hope to rouse society from its spiritual lethargy, and serve as a model to a civilization the foundations of which the corrosion of prejudice has well-nigh undermined. By the sublimity of their principles, the warmth of their love, the spotless purity of their character, and the depth of their devoutness and piety, let them demonstrate to their fellow-countrymen the ennobling reality of a power that shall weld a disrupted world.

We can prove ourselves worthy of our Cause only if in our individual conduct and corporate life we sedulously imitate the example of our beloved Master, Whom the terrors of tyranny, the storms of incessant abuse, the oppressiveness of humiliation, never caused to deviate a hair's breadth from the revealed Law of Bahá'u'lláh.

(12 April 1927, Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922-1932, pp. 131

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Shoghi Effendi would like you also to make all your effort to increase among the friends the spirit of unity and co-operation and to encourage the young believers to come into closer contact with the older generation of friends, so that through this harmonious co-operation the Cause may be given a further chance to develop and expand. The Faith needs both the experiences and the wisdom of age as well as the enthusiasm and the energy of youth. When all these qualities are harmoniously combined great results will be achieved.

(8 August 1933, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

The believers must be tolerant of each other's weaknesses and mistakes, and ever ready to forgive and forget the past because inharmony - whatever the cause - is sure to prevent the community from growing.

(26 September 1943, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

All the Bahá'ís, new and old alike, should devote themselves as much as possible to teaching the Faith; they should also realize that the atmosphere of true love and unity which they manifest within the Bahá'í Community will directly affect the public, and be the greatest magnet for attracting people to the Faith and confirming them.

(4 April 1947, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Local Spiritual Assembly)

One of the greatest problems in the Cause is the relation of the believers to each other; for their immaturity (shared with the rest of humanity) and imperfections retard the work, create complications, and discourage each other. And yet we must put up with these things and try and combat them through love, patience, and forgiveness individually and proper administrative action collectively.

(26 March 1943, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

When criticism and harsh words arise within a Bahá'í community, there is no remedy except to put the past behind one, and persuade all concerned to turn over a new leaf, and for the sake of God and His Faith refrain from mentioning the subjects which have led to misunderstanding and inharmony. The more the friends argue back and forth and maintain, each side, that their point of view is the right one, the worse the whole situation becomes.

When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow-Bahá'ís to take this point of view, and to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.

(16 February 1951, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

From Letters of the Universal House of Justice

Wherever a Bahá'í community exists, whether large or small, let it be distinguished for its abiding sense of security and faith, its high standard of rectitude, its complete freedom from all forms of prejudice, the spirit of love among its members, and for the closely knit fabric of its social life. The acute distinction between this and the present-day society will inevitably arouse the interest of the more enlightened, and as the world's gloom deepens the light of Bahá'í life will shine brighter and brighter until its brilliance must eventually attract the disillusioned masses and cause them to enter the haven of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, Who alone can bring them peace and justice and an ordered life.

(August 1968, Message to the Oceanic Conference, Palermo, Sicily, published in *Wellspring of Guidance: Messages 1963-1968*, p.

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...the friends should love each other, constantly encourage each other, work together, to be as one soul in one body, and in so doing become a true, organic, healthy body animated and illumined by the spirit. In such a body all will receive spiritual health and vitality from the organism itself, and the most perfect flowers and fruits will be brought forth.

(September 1968, published in *Wellspring of Guidance*, p.

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...[the Bahá'í community] is a single social organism, representative of the diversity of the human family, conducting its affairs through a system of commonly accepted consultative principles, and cherishing equally all the great outpourings of divine guidance in human history. Its existence is yet another convincing proof of the practicality of its Founder's vision of a united world, another evidence that humanity can live as one global society, equal to

whatever challenges its coming of age may entail. If the Bahá'í experience can contribute in whatever measure to reinforcing hope in the unity of the human race, we are happy to offer it as a model for study.

(October 1985 to the Peoples of the World, in
The Promise of World Peace
)

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